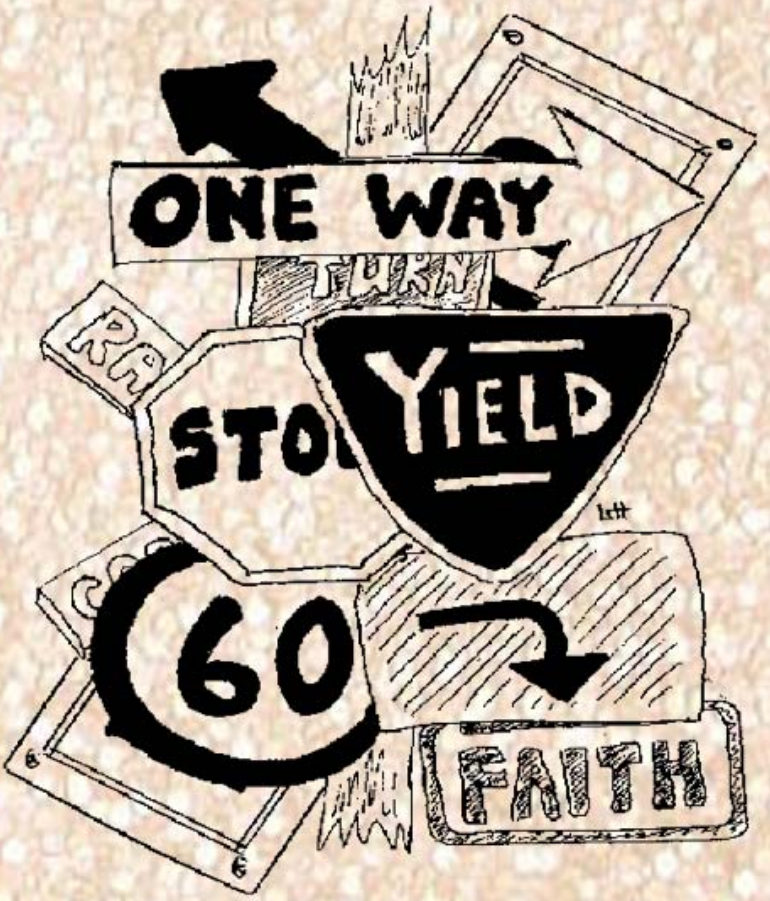
Making Sense of life



Lionel Hartley

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Typeset in Times
Illustrated with original drawings by Lionel Hartley
Typesetting by volunteers using a book template provided
and designed by the author.
Bible references from the Authorised (King James) version
unless otherwise marked.
Illustration on front cover by Lionel Hartley

Contents

Chapter 1: Crossed Eyes 5

Chapter 2: The Missing Peace 29

Chapter 3: When Bad Things Happen 51

Chapter 4: Where is God in my Pain 75

Chapter 5: When God Seems Distant 95

Chapter 6: Disease of Discouragement 111

Chapter 7: Wages for Worrying 133

"Crossed eyes"

Chapter 1: Crossed Eyes

Psalm 73, "A Psalm of Asaph. Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart.

2) But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped.

3) For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

4) For there are no bands in their death: but their strength is firm.

5) They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men.

6) Therefore pride compasseth them about as a chain; violence covereth them as a garment.

7) Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish.

8) They are corrupt, and speak wickedly concerning oppression: they speak loftily.

9) They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walketh through the earth.

10) Therefore his people return hither: and waters of a full cup are wrung out to them.

11) And they say, How doth God know? and is there knowledge in the most High?

12) Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches.

13) Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency.

14) For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning.

15) If I say, I will speak thus; behold, I should offend against the generation of thy children.

16) When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me;

17) Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end.

18) Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou

castedst them down into destruction.

19) How are they brought into desolation, as in a moment! they are utterly consumed with terrors.

20) As a dream when one awaketh; so, O Lord, when thou awakest, thou shalt despise their image.

21) Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins.

22) So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee.

23) Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand.

24) Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory.

25) Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee.

26) My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.

27) For, lo, they that are far from thee shall perish: thou hast destroyed all them that go a whoring from

thee.

28) But it is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all thy works."

Perspective changes everything. That's true in the trivial stuff, and it's true in the serious matters of life.

When the soldiers of Israel saw Goliath, they thought to themselves. "He is so big that we can never kill him."

When David saw Goliath, he thought to himself, "He is so big that I cannot miss him."

A man came to a construction site, where stonemasons were working.

The man said to one, "What are you doing?" The stonemason said, "You can see, I'm chipping a stone."

The man walked over to another mason and said, "What are you doing?" He answered, "I'm building a wall."

The man walked over to a third mason and said, "What are you doing?" This mason answered, "I am

building a cathedral."

All three were doing the same thing, but what a difference perspective makes!

Let's start with something less serious. David Heller interviewed children seeking to find their views of everyday life.

His book, *Growing Up Isn't Hard to Do If You Start Out As a Kid,* offers classic examples of the power of perspective.

Keller asked children, "When does a child officially become an adult?"

Pierce, age 7, said, "I'm grown-up right now…I'm just short for a grown-up!"

Roland, age 10, explained, "If the guy at the bank is nice to you, that probably means you have moved up to being grown-up."

Emma, age 7, noted, "You aren't really grown-up unless you have your own hair dryer!"

Valerie, age 9, shared some interesting insight, "At twenty, you become instantly awesome, and you

might even have a house to show for it!"

Keller also asked children, "What do you think it feels like to be a grown-up?"

Evan, age 8, said, "Ask our teacher, Mr. Reynolds, he might be grown-up!"

Marie, age 7, didn't sound very interested in adulthood. "It might be okay being grown-up, but I wouldn't give up being a kid to try it."

Harold, age 7, had wisdom beyond his years. "You might feel big for a while, but then you would run into your mother and that would change everything!"

Keller asked, "If you saw a person you didn't know, how could you tell if the person was grown-up?"

Harold, age 9, had a way to figure it out. "Take a look and find out if they got kids hanging on their backs. Then they're probably grown up."

Hilary, age 8, explained, "If they're Italian they probably are grown up. My grandparents are Italian and they're pretty grown up."

Regina, age 8, was adamant. "Grown-ups definitely won't be chewing gum no more, and they might not eat candy either. That's why I'm staying put!"

Perspective changes everything. When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.

It's true with Keller's questions for children, and it's true with the serious questions you and I ask about life.

No question is more perplexing than: "Why do bad things happen to God's people, and good things happen to those who hate God?"

In Psalm 73, Asaph asks that age-old question. He summarizes his perspective in Psalm 73:3 and 13.

Look at these verses with me.

Psalm 73:3 "For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked"

And verse 13 "Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence".

Not everyone whose eyes are closed is asleep,

and not everyone whose eyes are open can see.

When I was 6 years young I had optical surgery to shorten the internal muscles surrounding both my eyes because of a condition called strabismus (which is different from the fat bulging eyes mentioned in verse 7 of Psalm 73).

Strabismus is a visual problem in which the eyes are not aligned properly and each points in a different direction, and so we see double or poorly. Other terms for this condition are walleye, lazy eyes, wonky eyes or cross-eyes.

Many people have strabismus. See if you recognise any of these names: Paris Hilton, Ryan Gosling, Heidi Klum, Russell Crowe, Kristen Bell, Denzel Washington, Kate Moss, John F. Kennedy, Hugh Grant, Demi Moore, Penélope Cruz, Abraham Lincoln, Barbra Streisand, Jean-Paul Sartre, Forest Whitaker, Henry Fonda, Charles Bronson and Ben Turpin, all of whom have or have had strabismus.

Asaph also seemed to look at life with crossed eyes only, seeing life from an earthly perspective. It seems to him that it is pointless to live a godly life, purposeless to follow God.

As a result, Asaph becomes envious of the ungodly, hosts a pity-party for himself, and doubts the goodness of God.

We might be quick to judge Asaph. But let's be honest-at times we struggle with the same questions.

"Why does the godly person get cancer and die young, when the ungodly person lives a long, healthy life?"

"Why is my Christian child bullied at school all day long, and the non-Christian kids are the most popular?"

"Why does God allow the unethical business owner to become successful, when I'm struggling to make ends meet as I follow Christ?"

"Why does my unsaved sibling who hates Christ seem to have an easy life, when my Christian family seems to struggle constantly?"

Like Asaph, we struggle to put together the puzzle pieces of life in our fallen world. Like Asaph, we're tempted to envy the ungodly, to pity ourselves, and to doubt God's goodness.

When the wicked prosper, Asaph teaches us that the only place where life makes sense is at the foot of the cross.

Psalm 73 teaches us that when the wicked prosper, we have to shift our perspective by turning our gaze to the cross. The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.

We may be helped in this as we work our way through Psalm 73.

We might assume that Asaph's problem is theological. "If he only had a better understanding of what the Bible says about God, then he would have been fine."

However, Psalm 73:1 tells us that Asaph would have received an A+ on his theology final exam.

Let's read his insight into God. Psalm 73:1 "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart".

Asaph begins with great wisdom. "God is good. He's good all the time.

Asaph teaches us to look at life through the Bible; to look at our good God through His good book.

God's Word says that God is good all the time and we believe it. End of message. Shortest chapter ever.

Not so fast. Something intrudes on our view. It's like looking at the world through crossed eyes.

Life gets between us and the Bible. Bad stuff happens to good people. Good stuff happens to evil people.

As a result, while we trust God theologically, we are tempted to doubt God personally.

Here's how Asaph expresses it: Psalm 73:2-3, "But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked".

Asaph is looking at life with crossed eyes only. He is factoring in only what he can see from a temporal, fleshly perspective. He's focusing on the material and on the here-and-now.

What is it that Asaph is seeing and experiencing

that causes this conflict between what he knows about God theologically and what he feels about God personally? We find the answer starting in verses 4-5

Psalm 73:4-5 "They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills".

We're going to learn later in Psalm 73 that none of this is true from an eternal perspective. But it felt true to Asaph from an earthly perspective. If we look at life from a temporal perspective, we might feel the same way.

Microsoft co-founder, Bill Gates, is often listed as the wealthiest person in America. He lives in a 66,000-square-foot house. His charitable efforts have made him one of the most generous people on the planet, but don't expect him to donate to religious organizations.

Gates said in a Time magazine interview that (quote), "There is no evidence of anything divine about the human soul. Just in terms of allocation of time and resources, religion is not very efficient."

Gates told Charlie Rose in an interview that (quote), "The specific elements of Christianity are not something I'm a huge believer in."

Looking at life with crossed eyes only, we might easily wonder, "Why is Bill Gates blessed with billions and I'm blessed with unpaid bills?"

If we look at life with crossed eyes only, we might start to wonder why God blesses the ungodly with health and wealth.

Asaph struggles with doubting God's goodness when his crossed eyes saw life going smoothly for God-haters, and shares his struggles in Psalm 73:6-8 "Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression".

Asaph is not done. Read on as he vents further in verses 9-11, "Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. They say, 'How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?'"

When I think of arrogant blasphemy like this, I think of the billionaire founder of CNN, Ted Turner.

As a child, Turner wanted to be a missionary. But he lost his faith after he watched his little sister, Mary Jean, die of complications from a rare form of lupus.

Turner later explained (quote), "She was sick for five years before she passed away. And it just seemed so unfair, because she hadn't done anything wrong. What had she done wrong? And I couldn't get any answers. Christianity couldn't give me any answers to that."

As he climbed the corporate ladder, Turner infamously described Christianity as "a religion for losers."

Now in his seventies, Turner describes himself as an agnostic. He says he prays for his sick friends, praying to "whoever is listening." We should pray for Ted Turner's conversion.

Ted Turner illustrates Asaph and he illustrates the people Asaph is describing. Like Asaph, Turner looked at life with crossed eyes only, when his sister died and he lost his faith.

Like those Asaph describes in Psalm 73:6-11, Turner mocks God's people as following "a religion for losers."

A third reason that Asaph struggles with doubts about God's goodness is when his crossed eyes see bad things happening to God's people. Here's how he words it in Psalm verses 12-16, "This is what the wicked are like - always carefree, they increase in wealth. Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued, I have been punished every morning. If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed your children. When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me".

So do I end this chapter now - with a painful puzzle that has core pieces missing?

Asaph does not end Psalm 73 this way. Instead, he takes a major turn in verse 17.

He shifts his focus from looking at life with crossed eyes only, to looking at life with Cross-filled eyes. The difference is between crossed eyes and Cross-filled eyes.

Harry Emerson Fosdick was a national radio personality, a teacher and preacher in the early part of last century.

He said that when he was a boy, he would look out the window and watch the branches and leaves on the tree move. He would sense the wind blowing, and he put it together. He concluded that it was the moving of the branches that he could see that caused the movement of the wind that he could not see.

But he explained that when he grew to adulthood, he understood it differently, discovering that it was the wind he could not see that moved the branches that he could see.

It was this type of shift in perspective that allowed Asaph to move his focus from looking at life with crossed eyes only to looking at life with Cross-filled eyes.

Let's look at the most important verse in this entire Psalm: Verse 17 "Till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny".

When Asaph says that he "entered the sanctuary of God," he's talking about the Temple in Jerusalem

that Solomon built for God. This is equivalent to us in our modern-day going to church. Theologian Paul Anderson tells us, "Worship helps people see God in the midst of their troubled lives".

Plato said, "Conversion is not implanting eyes, for they exist already; but giving them direction, which they have not".

You may be wondering, "Hang on a minute Lionel, Psalm 73 is in the Old Testament. Christ hadn't died yet. How could Asaph have been looking at life with Cross-filled eyes and with Christ-tinted lenses?"

In 1 and 2 Chronicles we learn that Asaph was of the priestly line of the Levites. David commissioned him and his family to be the worship leaders in the house of Yahweh, in the sanctuary.

Asaph led worship at the dedication of Solomon's temple, and we're told in 1 Kings 6 and 7 that Solomon modelled the sanctuary temple after the Tabernacle built by Moses and described in Exodus and Leviticus.

The Old Testament sanctuary is where Israel worshipped God and made daily sacrifices to God for

their sins.

Hebrews chapters 8-10 tell us that the Old Testament sanctuary sacrificial system pictures and foreshadows Christ's perfect sacrifice for us. What Asaph witnesses in the Old Testament sanctuary was a powerful picture foreshadowing the cross of Christ.

Asaph, by going to church or entering the sanctuary of God, shifts his focus to God's holiness, our sinfulness, and to God's graciousness in providing a sacrificial substitute.

Asaph entering the sanctuary involves a dramatic foretelling and foreshadowing of everything Christ did for us.

As Asaph journeys to and into the sanctuary, the veil covering his crossed-eyes-only perspective of life is ripped away. His fleshly eyes are transformed into spiritual eyes.

They are now redemptive eyes, Messiah-tinted eyes and Cross-filled eyes.

That's why the main message of Psalm 73 is that the only place where life makes sense is at the foot of the Cross.

Are we confused, like Asaph was, about why a good God would allow bad things to happen to His people and allow good things to happen to bad people? Then we look to the cross.

Are we confused about why God would allow loved ones to die? Then we look to the cross.

Are we confused about why God would allow physical sickness and emotional pain into your life? Then we look to the cross.

When we wonder if God is fair, the cross shouts to us that "fairness" would have meant that we would die for our own sins and be separated from God forever.

Was it "fair" that the sinless Christ died for our sins? It wasn't fair, it was grace.

Difficulties in life tempt us to doubt God's goodness and fairness.

It is Christ's sacrificial death for us on the cross that declares once for all that God is not only good and fair all the time; God is gracious for all time and eternity.

A Cross-filled perspective changes our view of everything: our view of God-haters, of ourselves, and

of God.

Asaph shares his Cross-filled view of God-haters in verses 18-20 "Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! As a dream when one awakes; when you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies"

The view from the cross changes our mindset concerning those who reject God. We move from envy to pity; we move from resentment to compassionate prayer for their salvation.

Asaph also gains a new Cross-filled view of himself, that he needed grace as much as the God-haters do! We read about it in verses 21-22 "When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you".

The view from the cross changes our mindset concerning ourselves. We move from self-righteousness to humble repentance; we move from arrogance to clinging to Christ's grace.

This leads Asaph to a third renewed perspective: a Cross-filled view of God, that God's goodness is

grace-goodness. Asaph sings it like this in verses 23-26 "Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever".

The view from the cross changes our mindset concerning God. We move from seeing God as unfair to seeing God as forever faithfully forgiving.

We move from desiring what the wicked have to desiring nothing but God.

At the close of a worship service, James Byrd tells us that his pastor was introducing a hymn, but when he looked in the bulletin for the name and page number, he couldn't find it.

Thinking the hymn had been overlooked in printing, the pastor asked James if they were going to sing a closing hymn.

"It's there in the bulletin," James replied. The pastor looked again but still didn't see it.

"What was the hymn?" The pastor asked.

James rather hesitatingly announced, "Hymn number 326, Open My Eyes That I May See."

Let's contemplate the words of that hymn, written by Clara H Scott in 1895:

Open my eyes, that I may see glimpses of truth Thou hast for me; place in my hands the wonderful key that shall unclasp and set me free. Silently now I wait for Thee, ready, my God, Thy will to see; open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit Divine!

Open my ears that I may hear voices of truth Thou sendest clear; and while the wave-notes fall on my ear, everything false will disappear. Silently now I wait for Thee, Ready, my God, Thy will to see; Open my ears, illumine me, Spirit Divine!

Open my mouth, and let me bear gladly the warm truth everywhere; open my heart, and let me prepare love with Thy children thus to share. Silently now I wait for Thee, Ready, my God, Thy will to see; Open my heart, illumine me, Spirit Divine!

Asaph concludes Psalm 73 the way you and I must live our lives: combining theological truth with personal faith.

Listen to how Asaph trusts God theologically and personally in verses 27-28 "Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds".

What a contrast, what a change! Asaph shifts perspective from complaining about the rich and famous, to living his entire life with one goal, to make God's name famous. Are we living to make God's name famous?

We will worship God's graciousness instead of doubting God's goodness. We will swap our frustrations for God's fairness when we keep our eyes focused on the cross of Christ.

We will live to make God's name famous instead of envying the rich and famous when we keep our eyes focused on the cross of Christ.

The only place where life makes sense is at the foot of the cross.

An author from a previous century in her book *Desire of Ages* said, "If we would be saved at last, we

must learn the lesson of penitence and humiliation at the foot of the cross."

The only place where life makes sense is at the foot of the cross.

In the Abbey of Elstow, a stained-glass window portrays an image inspired in Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. Christian, the central character, can be seen kneeling at the foot of the Cross.

His heavy burden of guilt is rolling away from his shoulders, bringing ineffable relief to his soul. Christian says: "I saw it no more." The burden was gone. Its pain, sting, anxiety, and shame disappeared forever.

Because of our cross-eyed imperfection, selfishness, and defective relationships, it is very hard for us to see and understand the perfect and total forgiveness of God. However, the only place where life makes sense is at the foot of the cross.

Chapter 2: The Missing Peace

In this chapter, we search for the missing peace in our life puzzle.

Occasionally when one of our children did something we were proud of, someone may say to him or her, 'You're just like your father'. Whenever one of our children did something embarrassing, my wife Rosemary would say to the child, 'You're just like your father.'

What identifies you as a child of your father?

Jesus reveals, in Matthew 5:9, one characteristic that will always identify you as a child of your heavenly Father. He said, 'Happy are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.' You are a child of God when you're a peacemaker.

The Lord didn't say, 'Happy are the peace lovers,' because everybody loves peace. Or, 'Happy are the peaceable,' or those who never get bothered by anything. He says, 'Happy are those who make peace, who actively seek to resolve conflict.'

Matthew 5:9, "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God".

Romans 12:18, "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men".

A certain church where I preached occasionally contained many wonderful saints, however there was open friction between certain members, so much so that one group were labelled by the others as the Caravan Club. And the other group were labelled by the so-called Caravan Club as The Outsiders.

Evidently this conflict had been going on for some time and I never learned what the original issues were because shortly after I joined them, they were blessed with a new pastor. This man was a very spirit-filled Christian gentleman who, instead of arguing against conflict, lived and preached sermon after sermon on the love of God and the necessity of our love for each other.

He became a peacemaker by pointing every listener to the Prince of Peace. After a while the church bandied together and the friction and the labelling ceased.

In Philippians 4 there is an example of Paul the Apostle demonstrating how to be a peacemaker.

Philippians 4:1-3, "Therefore, my brethren, dearly beloved and longed for, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, my dearly beloved. I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord. And I entreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which laboured with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellowlabourers, whose names are in the book of life".

Philippians 4:8-9, "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you".

These words of admonition in this closing chapter of Philippians may be familiar, I am sure, to many. Paul begins with a word of entreaty to two ladies in the church, Euodia and Syntyche, who evidently are having a difficult time getting along.

We don't know anything about these ladies other than what Paul tells us here. Their names mean "fragrant" and "affable," misnomers in the situation in Philippi.

Someone has renamed Euodia "Oh Dear" and Syntyche "Sinful". Perhaps these names are more appropriate.

Paul anticipates a problem that could split the church. The context suggests that groups are beginning to form around these two ladies, and so he writes to encourage them to make up and to live in harmony with one another.

We need to remember that when these words first reached the church at Philippi they were read aloud in front of the entire congregation. They didn't have individual copies of the letter as we do.

Paul sent a scroll, or perhaps pieces of papyrus, and one of the elders of the church read it aloud.

I am sure that this was a bit embarrassing. Great silence must have followed the reading of this passage, and perhaps people looked out of the corners of their eyes to Euodia and Syntyche, seated at opposite ends

of the sanctuary, and watched them turn crimson.

Paul's approach to problems like this was head-on. He sensed that there was a problem here that could be very destructive in the church, and so he wants to meet it at its incipient stages.

Interestingly, as you read Philippians seriously, you can't help but come to the conclusion that the primary purpose for this epistle was to solve the problem between Euodia and Syntyche. Almost everything that Paul has to say, apart from his word of thanksgiving for the gift they had sent and a few other miscellaneous exhortations, has to do with this potential split in the body of Christ.

You will notice that, in chapter 4 verse 1, Paul concludes his argument with this command: "Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, so stand firm in the Lord, my beloved."

Paul's concern is that the church in Philippi not only have internal healing, but that it presents a united front to the world. They ought to stand fast, in one mind. So from this point on, he begins to lay out some of the principles which will make possible that united stand.

In chapter 2, verse 3 there is a statement of perhaps the most important truth that will make that unity possible: "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others".

He says, in essence, "Don't be preoccupied with your own concerns, but be actively occupied with the interests of others. That is what will make possible a spirit of unity and communion in the church."

Then he cites as an illustration the life of Jesus Christ, who gave up his rights as God and came to earth in order to be a servant.

He follows with an illustration from his own life — his willingness, as he says in verse 17, to be "poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith."

Then he alludes to the example of Timothy and finally to that of Epaphroditus, who was willing to give up his life for the sake of the apostle Paul.

In chapter 3 he lays down another more basic

principle, one that underlies the idea of giving up our rights and our interests for those of others. Here he deals with the principle of the cross, this great truth that we have died with Christ, and that therefore our life is no longer ours. But we have available to us the life of Jesus Christ, and we serve in the power of that life. The principle of the cross is that life comes out of death.

So then in chapter 4, verse 1, he says, "Therefore, stand firm".

I would suggest that all of these great truths, all of these mighty facts in these opening chapters, including the great Christological section in chapter 2, were for the benefit of the congregation directly related to the actions of Euodia and Syntyche.

Theologian David Roper wrote concerning this by saying, "It is as though Paul has taken a massive pyramid of truth and has turned it on its apex, so that all the weight of that pyramid is brought to bear upon this one issue. His point seems to be, 'Euodia and Syntyche, there is absolutely no reason why you should live in disharmony'."

Given the facts presented to us in the book of

Philippians, there is no reason why any of us should live in disharmony with one another. We have everything that we need in order to live in love, compassion, and unity.

This is what the Christian message is all about. The truth in the word of God is intended to be brought to bear upon these very practical areas of life — how we live with one another in our homes, how we live in our office, and on our street, and with one another here in the body of Christ. That is where the truth is to be applied.

In Colossians, chapter 1, Paul prays for the church in Colossi.

Colossians 1:9-11, "For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; Strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness".

One aspect of that prayer is that they might

realize all the power that they have in the Godhead, power that is available to them. And Paul says that all of that power is given to us in order to give us "endurance and patience with joy."

All of that power is not given to us to do mighty works of epic proportions, to produce great, world-shaking events, but, rather, to enable us to endure and to give us patience - to give us endurance and patience with joy.

That is the purpose of the truth of God. It is to be applied right in these very practical areas of life - such as the illustration given to us here of Euodia and Syntyche.

Are we reading our Bibles that way? Are we using the truth that way in our life? That is the way it ought to be used. We ought to study the Word not just in order to know it, but so that it might be the means, in every relationship, to the end of our being what God intends us to be.

Which is more important to you: being right or being in relationship?

In his book, *'Out of the Question … Into the*

Mystery', Leonard Sweet tells of an unforgettable experience that had happened to him a few years earlier.

This is what he writes, "Tom Wiles served a stint as university chaplain at Grand Canyon University in Phoenix, Arizona.

[Around the year 2003], he picked me up at the Phoenix airport in his new Ford pickup and whisked me away to keynote a leadership conference at the university.

Since I was still mourning the trade-in of my Dodge truck, we immediately bonded, sharing truck stories and laughing at the bumper-sticker truism: 'Nothing is more beautiful than a man and his truck.'

As I climbed into his 2002 Ranger for the ride back to the airport a day later, I noticed two big scrapes by the passenger door. 'What happened here?' I asked.

'My neighbour's basketball post fell and left those dents and white scars,' Tom replied with a downcast voice.

'You're kidding! How awful,' I commiserated. 'This truck is so new I can smell it.'

'What's even worse is my neighbour doesn't feel responsible for the damage.'

Rising to my newfound friend's defence, I said, 'Did you contact your insurance company? How are you going to get him to pay for it?'

'This has been a real spiritual journey for me,' Tom replied. 'After a lot of soul-searching and discussions with my wife about hiring an attorney, it came down to this: I can either be in the right against my neighbour or I can be in a relationship with my neighbour.

Since my neighbour will probably be with me longer than this truck, I decided that I'd rather be in a relationship than be in the right.'"

It is interesting that in the case of Euodia and Syntyche, that Paul does not take sides.

He doesn't say, "Now, Euodia, the problem is your own stubbornness and your unwillingness to give up your rights. Actually Syntyche is in the right. So you should make up." Or maybe, "Syntyche, it's all your evil-doing…"

He doesn't use that approach, because it doesn't

really matter who is right and who is wrong.

We don't have to demonstrate the rightness of our position, or the error in another's position, in order to live in harmony with them.

We have in Jesus Christ all that we need in order to set aside our own rights and to be loving and forgiving, and giving.

In any situation, we don't have to *understand*, we just have to be *understanding*.

We don't have to demonstrate to others that we are *right*, we just have to be *righteous* in our approach to the situation.

Everything we need in order to live in harmony is available to us. So Paul the peacemaker can simply entreat Euodia and Syntyche to live in harmony with one another.

Philippians 4:3, "And I entreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which laboured with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellowlabourers, whose names are in the book of life."

Notice that in verse 3 Paul calls for the rest of

the body to be peacemakers and assist these women. He refers to an individual who is identified here as his 'yokefellow' or 'true comrade' in other translations, and to another person by the name of Clement. We know who Clement was. He was a first-century church father, a very significant person in the church after the death of the apostles, whose writings we have today.

But we don't know who this 'yokefellow' was. It could be that this is a Greek proper name, Syzygus or Suzuge, of some individual living in Philippi who could assist these two women.

One questionable commentary has suggested that this might have been the apostle Paul's wife.

This particular term is used from time to time to refer to one's marriage partner, although it doesn't seem likely that at this time the Apostle had a wife.

Scripture suggests otherwise. Paul may have been married at one time in his life because he was a member of the Sanhedrin, and men usually had to be married to sit on that particular council.

If that is the case, then perhaps his wife left him when he acknowledged Jesus as Messiah.

That may be one of the things Paul is referring to in this very book when he says that he has suffered the loss of all things in order that he might gain Christ.

He may have lost his wife and his family, among all the other things that had been so precious to him. But it doesn't seem that at this point he could have had a wife.

Other commentaries suggest that he is referring to Timothy, who was his scribe. He was seated alongside the Apostle as he dictated these words, and Timothy wrote them down.

Perhaps Paul turned to Timothy and said, "Yokefellow, I encourage you, when you go back to Philippi, to assist these women," and Timothy wrote it right into the text for our benefit.

But in any case, whoever it was, Paul recognizes that these women in Philippi need help.

There are some sins that are so deeply entrenched in our lives, some problems that are so great, that we need help from the rest of the body of Christ in order to lay hold of the resources of Christ that we have.

We may be so blinded, so immobilized by our

own fleshly actions, so much a prisoner of the flesh, that we need help from one another. It is to this that Paul refers when he says to "help these women".

The term which Paul uses here, translated ‘help,’ doesn't mean ‘assist,’ as we might use the word today. There is another term used in the New Testament that indicates that sort of help, that is to say, meeting of the needs of another person.

This term means to "take them along with you." The idea is that they are to take the two women to the same source of strength that they have. "Your strength is in the Lord. Now take them to the Lord to find help."

Paul recognizes that, though the church body can be useful in assisting people to straighten out their problems, we cannot really help people in the same sense that we endeavour to meet their needs.

Only the Lord can truly meet their needs.

The function of the church body is to take people to the Lord, who alone meets their needs.

In Hebrews 4, the author of that book writes that we have a high priest who can be touched by the feelings of our infirmities. "Therefore," he says, "let us

go boldly to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy [mercy is for the helpless.] and find grace [grace is for the undeserving or 'worthless'] to help in time of need."

He says that whenever you feel helpless or worthless, go to the throne of grace. There you will receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

And that is the New Testament term that means '*help*' in the sense of meeting someone's need. It is used throughout Scripture for the kind of help that God gives.

Normally God is the subject of the action, with one notable exception.

In the book of Acts, chapter 27, when the apostle Paul is on a ship which is beginning to break up, we read that the sailors attached ropes under the ship to help hold it together.

That is the same term as is used in Hebrews 4. It conveys the idea of holding something together which is threatening to break apart.

That is the kind of help that God, and only God, can provide.

Our function as members of the body of Christ is not to provide that kind of help, because we can't, but to take people to the Lord who alone can hold people together.

We however, are called to be peacemakers.

Firstly, I should be a peacemaker because unresolved conflict blocks my fellowship with God. The Bible says, in 1 John 4:19, 'How can a man say, "I love God" and hate his brother at the same time?'

When I'm out of fellowship with a brother or sister, then that is going to make a difference to my relationship with God.

God tells us that when that happens I should seek reconciliation with my brother or sister before coming to worship him as though everything was all right.

Matthew 5:23-24, "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift."

Secondly, I should be a peacemaker because unresolved conflict hinders God from answering my

prayers.

The apostle Peter tells husbands to either treat their wives with respect or they might just as well forget about praying.

1 Peter 3:7, "Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered."

This counsel, of course has a wider application than just to husbands and wives.

There is no substitute for reconciliation. Giving, sharing, reading the Bible, or praying cannot substitute for peacemaking. If I'm having a hard time getting an answer to my prayers, I need check out my relationships.

And thirdly I should be a peacemaker because conflict hinders my own peace.

Let me digress for a moment to clear up two misconceptions about peacemaking.

Firstly, peacemaking is not avoiding conflict. It's not running from the problem. It's not pretending it

doesn't exist.

Saying, 'I don't want to talk about it,' is not peacemaking, that's avoidance. None of us like conflict, but when we avoid it, when we put it off, it only festers and gets worse.

And secondly, peacemaking is not appeasement, conciliation or pacification. When we always give in and let the other person have their way, when we let people trample on us, that's passivity, not peacemaking.

Jesus never said we had to give up our identity or be a chameleon.

Peacemaking is not giving in all the time. It's not appeasement, and it's not avoiding the issue. It's actively seeking to resolve the conflict.

Who can be a peacemaker? You can. I can. Anybody can become a peacemaker. But first we must have peace on the inside of us.

We can't spread peace if we're at war on the inside. If I don't have peace in my heart I certainly can't offer it to anybody else.

How do I find the peace of God? Where do I get

it? We invite the Prince of Peace into our life.

Jesus said, 'My peace I give to you. It's a different kind of peace from the peace that the world gives. The world's peace is external; my peace is internal' (John 14:27 paraphrase).

It's peace we can have in the midst of chaos. When everything's falling apart, we can still be at peace. That's the kind of peace that God wants to give us.

When we have that in our life, then we can offer it to others.

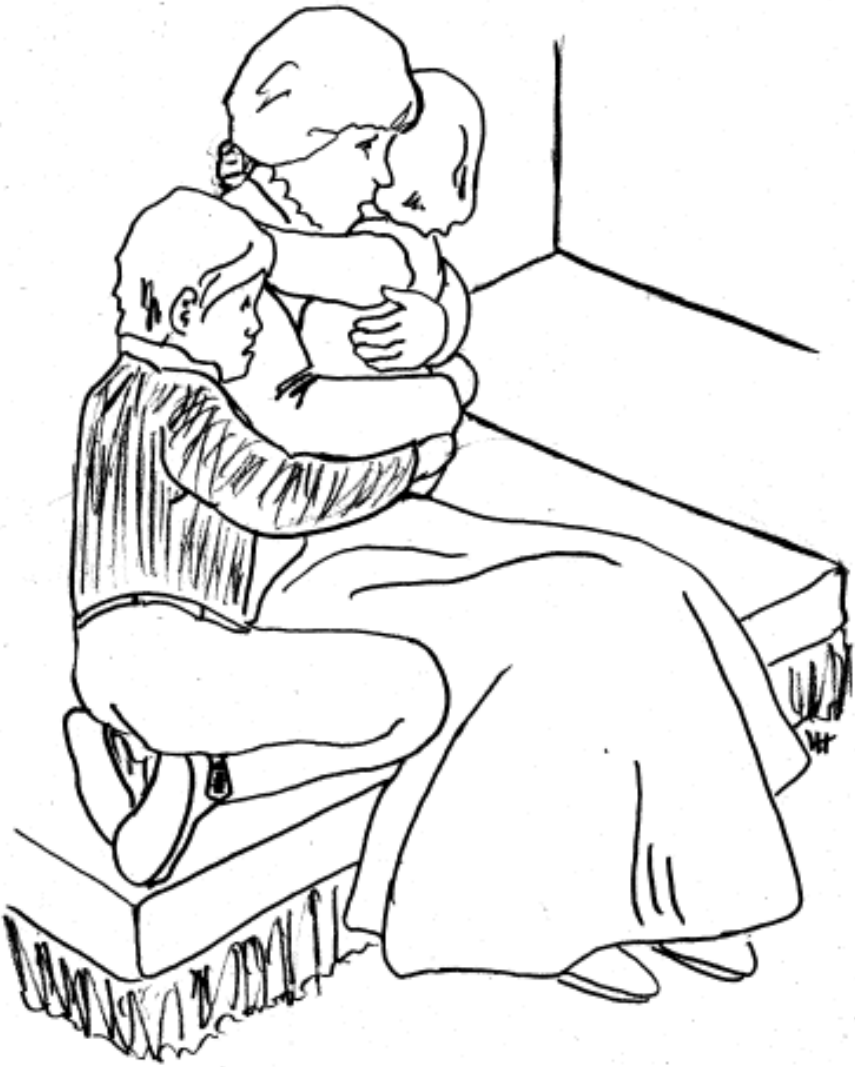
That's the order: First, the peace of Christ; then peace with others. So “let the peace of Christ rule in [our] hearts”(Colossians 3:15).

St. Francis of Assisi used to pray, 'Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace.' That's a great prayer to pray. Wherever there are hostilities, let me bring peace. Let me do the most Christ-like thing that I can do to bring people together in peace. "Happy are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God" (Matthew 5:9).

"Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life."

— Saint Francis of Assisi (C. 1181-1226)



"Happy are the peacemakers
for they will be called the children of God"
(Matthew 5:9).

Chapter 3: When Bad Things Happen

Luke 13:1-5, "There were present at that season some that told him of the Galilaeans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish."

The ending of each year is supposed to be a joyous festive season. However, on Boxing Day (the day following Christmas) in 2004, more than 230,000 people were killed across 11 countries after a 9.3 magnitude earthquake in the Indian Ocean led to a tsunami. Indonesia was the worst affected country, followed by Sri Lanka, India and Thailand, in one of the deadliest natural disasters in history.

A year before the tsunami, a 6.6 magnitude earthquake on Boxing Day 2003 led to the deaths of

more than 26,000 people in the city of Bam in Iran. A further 30,000 people were injured as a result of the earthquake.

Here in Australia in what has become known as Black Christmas, low rainfall across winter and spring 2001 combined with a hot, dry December created ideal conditions for bushfires. 109 homes and hundreds of other buildings were destroyed with a damage bill of 70 million dollars

At Christmas during the 2019-20 Australian bushfire season there were at least 2,680 homes lost, 33 human deaths, reports of at least 1.25 billion wild animals killed and over 46 million acres burned.

At Christmas 1974 Cyclone Tracy devastated Darwin, the Northern Territory's capital, with gale-force winds, killing 71 people and causing hundreds of millions of dollars in damaged homes and businesses. Seven out of every 10 buildings there were destroyed.

At Christmastide in 1953 a train was travelling from Wellington to Auckland, south to north in New Zealand's North Island when the Whangaehu River bridge collapsed under the weight of a passenger train. Known as the Tangiwai Disaster, it claimed the lives of

151 people when the train derailed and the first six carriages plunged into the river below. The driver was among the dead.

China's tragedies include the 4 million men women and children who died in the 1931 floods, the 900,000 who died in the 1887 Yellow River flood, 830,000 in the 1556 Shaanxi earthquake during the Ming dynasty and 655,000 in the 1976 Tangshan earthquake.

Why do bad things happen to good people? People have been asking that question since the beginning of time.

The ancient Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt for over 400 years. The early Christians were persecuted and martyred. Naturally, they wondered why they had to suffer so. The Jewish people of today are still hard-pressed to explain how a merciful God could allow six million of their brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers to be annihilated.

Theodicy is a philosophical discipline that searches for an answer to the problem of evil. Its fundamental question is "If God is good, why is there evil?"

In other words, why do bad things happen to good people? The word theodicy, is a combination of the Greek words for God and justice.

Imagine a triangle. At one tip of the triangle: "God is all powerful."

At the second tip of the triangle: "God is all good."

And at the third tip of the triangle: "Evil exists."

Theodicists call this triangle the *Inconsistent Triad*, and theodicy attempts to somehow make consistent these three inconsistent things.

A philosopher named Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) first used the term with the idea of defending God against charges of injustice and accusations of involvement in moral and natural evil.

Others since have used the word theodicy to explain why God permits evil with the assumption that He doesn't.

Most non-Christian religions have no problem with theodicy because their gods are mere reflections of the human beings who serve them. No one expects

these gods to do much good. These religions tend to focus on appeasing the gods, with the hope of keeping their bad tempers and violent natures in check.

What could people possibly do to deserve a tidal wave or an earthquake, terrorism, a hurricane or tornado?

Why do bad things happen to good people? We even ask the question on a personal level. Why did God allow our baby to die, or be born with birth defects? Why did the drunk driver turn down our street on that fateful day?

Why was I born with this set of genes? Why did God allow my honest, tithe-paying, Sabbath-keeping, Dorcas-serving, God-fearing, husband-loving spouse to die?

These are serious questions, and they cause our hearts to cry out for a reasonable explanation.

Jesus' disciples had their own concerns about the injustice of it all.

Luke 13:1-5, "There were present at that season some that told him of the Galilaeans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus

answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish."

In these verses we get a glimpse of two tragedies that had occurred in the city of Jerusalem in Jesus' day.

The first was an atrocity of human violence — a terrorist attack, if you will.

A group of Jews from Galilee had made their pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem to make their sacrifices to God when they were ambushed at the altar by a contingent of Pilate's army. It was a blood-thirsty massacre that sent shock waves throughout the Jewish community. Innocent men had been killed in the very act of worship and the Temple had been desecrated.

What do we say when bad things like this happen to good people?

The other incident was a natural disaster — what

insurance companies of today call an Act of God.

A watchtower had crumbled and fallen in Siloam killing eighteen innocent bystanders. Siloam was the area of Jerusalem where devout Jews came for cleansing and purification. It was the site of the pool of Siloam. (You may remember, in John 9:7 when Jesus healed the blind man, he told him to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam.) Again, innocent people were killed for seemingly no apparent reason.

What do we say when bad things like this happen?

Over the years there have been many attempts to answer the question.

The ancient view was that God punished the wicked and rewarded the righteous, so that when misfortune occurred, you could be sure the victim had it coming to him.

Many of us still subconsciously hold to this theory. A golfer hits a forceful slice off the tee, but instead of going into the woods, the ball hits a tree and ricochets into the middle of the fairway. His companion shrugs his shoulders and says, "You must be living right."

In his book, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*,

Thornton Wilder weaves an intriguing tale of a small village in South America.

The peasants get up every morning at the crack of dawn to go to work in the fields. But there is a great chasm between their village where they live and the fields where they toil, and to get to the fields they must cross a rickety suspension bridge.

One day, without warning, the bridge collapses, and six peasants fall to their deaths. It's a terrible tragedy.

The whole village is in shock. After the dead are buried, the bridge is restored and life resumes to normal, the village priest decides to make it his personal mission to determine why it was that these particular men and women died.

He figured there had to be some logical explanation. And so, meticulously, he studies every aspect of their lives. He talked to their loved ones. He researched their past.

Finally, he reached this conclusion: There is neither rhyme nor reason why these particular six people died. They were no better and no worse than any of the other villagers. Their death was a tragedy, but there is

no explanation, other than the fact that they happened to be on the bridge when it fell.

When bad things happen, we look for a logical explanation. As often as not, there is none. Our attempts at explanations seem to defy logic.

Another theory of why the innocent suffer is that, though unfortunate and undeserved, the suffering of a few can lead to the betterment of the whole.

It was this mentality that prompted a certain British immunologist to suggest that we should simply allow the Covid-19 virus kill as many people as necessary to provide a herd immunity to protect the next generation, in the hopes that enough people would survive for there to be one.

The early Christians were persecuted, but through their faithful witness, others accepted Jesus as the Christ.

The Holocaust was an horrific nightmare of untold proportions, but it helped sway the United Nations to recognize the Jewish state of Israel.

Racial segregation in America and South Africa denied generations of dark-skinned people education

and opportunity, but it finally gave way to Civil Rights legislation.

When bad things happen, we often look for a positive outcome, as if putting a positive spin on tragedy will, somehow, soften the blow.

To add to the pain of loss concerning the death of a child, certain funeral director said glibly, "God picks the most beautiful flowers for his heavenly bouquet." Somehow, that's not a very comforting thought.

Still another explanation as to why bad things happen to good people is that life is a mystery, and although there are reasons why bad things happen as they do, those reasons are not always known to us.

Again, Thornton Wilder repeated the notion that our view of life is like looking at a tapestry from the reverse side.

Seen from our perspective, life is a jumble of knots and threads and loose ends protruding in every direction.

If we could only see the tapestry from the other side — from God's perspective — then we'd see that it has perfect form and symmetry and balance.

As the Apostle Paul said to the Corinthians, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, even as I was also fully known" (1Corinthians 13:12).

In his book, *Praying for Jennifer,* John Cobb puts forth yet another way of grappling with the question of why the innocent suffer.

He says our problem is not in making sense of everyday life, but in comprehending the nature of God.

Cobb says, as long as we perceive God as some sort of celestial power broker sitting high in the heavens parcelling out blessings here and inflicting punishments there, we'll always be at a loss to explain why bad things happen to good people.

Cobb's book, based on a true story, is about a group of four teenagers, all model students in school and members of their church youth group. They were out joy riding in the country one day — not misbehaving in any way — when the girl driving the car failed to negotiate a curve, and the car overturned.

Three of the kids were thrown free and escaped with minor scrapes and bruises.

The fourth, Jennifer, was critically injured. She was rushed to the hospital and put on life support.

Jennifer's friends rallied around her and prayed that she might live.

They solicited the help of their minister and the other members of their youth group and maintained a 24-hour vigil at the hospital.

As they rotated shifts around the clock, taking turns praying for Jennifer, they talked about what had happened and tried to make sense of it all. "Why Jennifer, of all people?" they wondered.

After about a week, Jennifer awoke from the coma she was in and was taken off life support.

Her friends rejoiced. Their prayers had been heard.

Or so it seemed. But they soon got another bitter taste of reality when they learned that she was paralysed from the neck down and would probably be a quadriplegic for the rest of her life.

As Cobb tells the story, the youth come together at the church to talk about their feelings and help each

other make sense out of their experience.

Painstakingly, they come to understand that God is not an omnipotent Godfather who holds the reigns over life, but an ever-present force - a gentle Spirit — who abides with us and seeks to comfort us in our suffering.

They come to see that God neither causes bad things to happen, nor prevents bad things from happening.

God does not interfere with the natural consequences of cause and effect. The rain falls on the just as well as the unjust. God stands with us, but God does not stand in the way.

Many years ago when one of my infant sons needed to see a hearing specialist in the town of Newcastle in New South Wales, as we whiled away the time prior to our appointment in an upstairs waiting room, we looked down through the window at the traffic below in Hunter Street, the main street of the town.

As we watched the traffic, I saw a car, driving slowly on the wrong side of the road.

Coming toward it on the correct side of the road,

also driving slowly, was another car. The driver of this car obviously oblivious to the fact that the vehicle in front of him or her was coming towards them rather than travelling in the same direction.

As you picture this in your mind, I am sure, like me watching it happen, you can see in your mind's eye that, unless circumstances change, they are going to crash head-on — which is what actually happened moments later.

The fact that they both got out of their vehicles and stood in the street dialoguing suggests that neither were hurt physically.

Now you could say that I was prescient and could predict or prophecy that they would crash, given that from my vantage view I knew what would happen.

But let me assure you I certainly did not cause the crash. Just because I knew about it in advance, albeit only for a few moments, doesn't mean I am responsible for it, nor was it practical for me to prevent it.

Our problem is that we'd like to have a world that is totally predictable and manageable and under control. One in which, if we abide by certain rules (our

rules), we can be assured of getting a fair deal. “Tell me what's required and what I can expect in return.”

This sort of wishful thinking is all well and good, until we realize how it influences our concept of God. We want a God who plays by our rules, who fits into our box.

We may think that if we read our Bibles, say our prayers, go to church, gift our offerings, abstain from sin and do nice things for others, then we ought to be able to expect equal consideration from God. We ought to be able to expect God to protect us from danger, answer our questions, and keep His end of the bargain.

The bottom line is this: We want a God on our terms, and that's the essence of our sinfulness.

God made us in His image yet we create this picture of God in our image, and then hold God to our expectations.

Let's go back to Luke 13:1-5. Why did Jesus *not* answer the question: "What about those Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices?"

He didn't answer the question because there is no answer. Instead, he addressed the underlying

sinfulness betrayed by the question and said, "Unless you repent, you will all perish in the same way."

Repent? Repent of what? Repent of our idolatry. Admit to ourselves (and God) that the God we worship is largely the product of our own design, and not the God revealed in Scripture by Jesus Christ.

Isaiah, said of God, "For my thoughts are not Your thoughts, neither are Your ways my ways" (Isaiah 55:8).

God answered Job's complaint by asking, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" (Job 38:4)

Note how Job repented and confessed, "I know that thou canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from thee. Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge? therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not" (Job 42:2-3)

May we let go of that tired, old notion of a capricious God who conforms to our expectations. And let us accept the fact that the God we seek to worship and serve is the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth

who loved us so much that he sent his only begotten son, Jesus Christ, to be wounded for our transgressions and die for our sins.

All this so that, in the midst of our pain and suffering, we might have the assurance that God is with us, we are not alone; and that God's grace will be sufficient for all of our needs.

On Sunday evening, December 4, 1994, Rick and Suzie Harper and their nine-year-old daughter, Kelly, were trimming the Christmas tree in their home in Red Oak, Texas, just south of Dallas when Suzie began to have difficulty breathing.

She was asthmatic, and she'd had attacks like this before. She used her inhaler, but it only got worse.

Reluctantly, she asked Rick to drive her to the emergency room. She hated to be a bother.

Halfway between their house and the hospital she stopped breathing. Rick stopped to give her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, then took off again and raced as fast as he could for help.

By the time they reached the hospital she had not been breathing for several minutes. The emergency

personnel gave her a shot to relax her lungs and put her on oxygen, but it was too late. She was, for all practical purposes, brain-dead.

Suzie's mother, Ina, was a member of Pastor Philip McLarty's congregation in Iowa Park. She called him from the hospital, and he rushed down to be with her.

In the following days and weeks, they spent many hours rehashing the terrible ordeal of December 4, trying to make sense of what had happened.

In the process, he tried to console her in her grief but confessed that as much as anything, she was the one who consoled him.

In time, Suzie died, and as they prepared for the funeral, Ina said something McLarty says that he will never forget.

She said, "There's nothing more we can do; Suzie's in God's hands. God lent her to us for forty-three years, and now, she's waiting to be taken to her new home. Life goes on. We can't look back. God will be with us in the future just as He has in the past."

James 1:2-4 in Jack Blanco's *Clear Word*

Translation reads, "My brothers, when sufferings and temptations come your way, try to face them joyfully. You know that when your faith in God is tested and you survive the test, it will be stronger than before. So hold on and let your faith be tested, because as it survives and matures, your character will mature as well and you will become even more steadfast.

What do you say when bad things happen to good people?

In the late 1950s, as a boy soprano, I was invited to sing a solo piece with the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra for a civic event. For the feature piece of the event they were playing Jean Sebellius' rousing tone poem *Finlandia*.

At almost the close of the anthem, prior to the final fanfare, the orchestra suddenly went quiet and my voice alone filled the concert hall as I sang these words: "Be still, my soul, the Lord is on Thy side. Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain. Leave to Thy God to order and provide; in every change He faithful will remain. Be still, my soul, thy best, thy heavenly friend, through thorny ways leads to a joyful end."

These words were composed by Katharina von

Schlegel in 1752, and verses in her poem that I didn't sing but equally moving are: “Be still, my soul: thy God doth undertake to guide the future as He has the past. Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake; all now mysterious shall be bright at last. Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below.

Be still, my soul: the hour is hastening on when we shall be forever with the Lord, when disappointment, grief, and fear are gone, sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored. Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past, all safe and blessed we shall meet at last”. (Translation by Jane Borthwick, 1853.)

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a best-selling book, *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*. I recently read a story about a psychologist who was trying to write a similar book at the same time. Kushner's book came out first, and it got the praise. People were talking about it all the time and it sold a whole lot more copies than the other fellow's book.

The psychologist had to go to another psychologist for some counselling. They talked about his envy of Kushner. Every time Kushner was on a television interview, the other fellow went mad with

jealousy. He couldn't stand it. Why should Kushner be praised and not him? Why should Kushner's book sell so well and his so poorly? The counsellor tried to help him get it sorted out, to get it in perspective, to bring things back in line.

Here's what they discovered: Rabbi Kushner's book was better than his, because Harold Kushner spoke from experience.

He and his wife had a son with progeria, also known as Hutchinson-Gilford syndrome and Werner syndrome, an extremely rare, progressive genetic disorder that causes children to age rapidly, starting in their first two years of life. Children with progeria generally appear normal at birth, however by the age of nine, a child looks as if he's fifty. His skin is wrinkled, his hair is falling out, his bones are brittle and he dies in his early teen years.

Parents don't know what to do, how to feel, how to cope. How much suffering can a family stand? How much suffering can parents watch in their children and not go mad? What's the meaning of it all?

In our mind's eye we see Rabbi Kushner sitting at his desk and starting to write. He writes with tears in

his eyes and a knife in his heart. He writes with stones of heaviness in his soul. He writes about suffering, and his tears blot the ink on the pages.

He writes about suffering as a sufferer. People know he's not a doctor reading some medical chart. He's a hurt, bruised, and tormented man. When he writes about suffering, they listen because he knows suffering in his own soul.

But what of the psychologist? He wrote a great book about suffering without having to suffer. He wanted to tell people what it was like and how to cope with it without feeling the aching in his own heart.

I believe that God allows us to suffer sometimes to give us a true empathy with others who are suffering that we might be a comfort to them.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4, "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God".

Here is a Sabbath day prayer translated from Jack Riemer's *'Likrat Shabbat*':

We cannot merely pray to you, O God, to end war; for we know that You have made the world in a way that we must find our own path to peace within ourselves and with our neighbours.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to end starvation; for You have already given us the resources with which to feed the entire world, if we would only use them wisely.

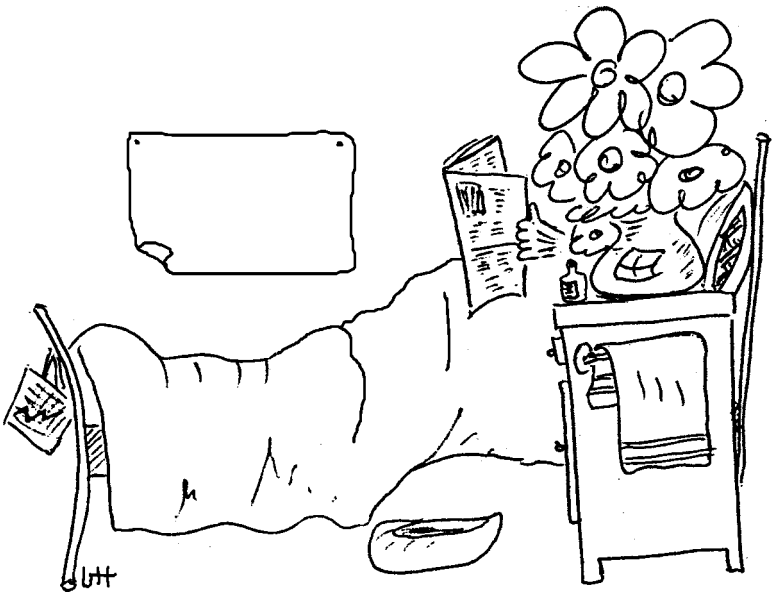
We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to root out prejudice; for You have already given us eyes with which to see the good in all people, if we would only use them rightly.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to end despair, for You have already given us the power to clear away slums and to give hope, if we would only use our power justly.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to end disease; for You have already given us great minds with which to search out cures and healing, if we would only use them constructively.

Therefore we pray to You instead, O God, for strength, determination and will power, to *do* instead of just pray, to *become* instead of merely to wish.

Amen.



"God allows us to suffer sometimes"

Chapter 4: Where is God in my Pain

As Library administrator for a Gold Coast church Library, I frequently read books and preview DVDs for our library.

The other evening my wife Rosemary and I watched a video version of the biography of CD Lewis for inclusion in the library. Lewis had waxed lyrical on suffering but was never really convinced until it hit home by touching his personal life.

This is what he said of this experience: "We were promised sufferings. They were part of the program. We were even told, 'Blessed are they that mourn,' and I accept it. I've got nothing that I hadn't bargained for. Of course it is different when the thing happens to oneself, not to others, and in reality, not imagination."

Many people's lives are full of suffering. Some reading this right now are suffering.

How do we make sense of this suffering? Why does God allow suffering? Why does he allow the innocent and righteous to suffer? Where is God when

I'm hurting?

An elderly man groans in pain, longing for release. A young woman loses her husband in a motorbike accident, leaving her to raise her three children alone. We cringe at the horror of Auschwitz.

We're confronted and offended by such misery. We often search for hidden meaning contained within suffering itself, or we seek explanations from other places.

The breadth of suffering in the world raises profound questions about the nature of God, and his involvement in human life. If God is all good, all-powerful, and all loving, then why do the innocent suffer?

Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament provides complete answers to this question. But some answers are given, and these ideas can be explored.

The Bible teaches that we suffer largely because of the fallen, broken, wounded, sinful nature of humanity.

Sin has entered the world and brought death,

disease, division, and destruction.

Human beings rebel against God and his holiness, righteousness, and justice. And, human bodies and the creation are frail. But, in spite of this very real struggle, we are assured that God remains in authority.

We are assured that when Christ returns all things will be eternally restored-and this includes the end of all suffering and evil.

In this life, we experience suffering and pain. These affront our sense of the world's fairness. They raise questions about the goodness, the compassion, even the existence of God.

Jesus' Parable of the *Mustard Seed* is one of the shorter parables of Jesus. It appears in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke and also in the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas.

For example, in Mark 4:30-32 in the *World English Bible* the story goes like this: [Jesus] said, "How will we liken the Kingdom of God? Or with what parable will we illustrate it? It's like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, though it is less than all the seeds that are on the earth, yet when it

is sown, grows up, and becomes greater than all the herbs, and puts out great branches, so that the birds of the sky can lodge under its shadow."

We often misunderstand the parable of the mustard seed. In a world addicted to the shiny, successful, eye-catching, and exponentially-growing, the kingdom of God is almost embarrassingly ordinary. But it's perfect for rest and shade and food.

The kingdom of God is rest and shade and renewal and hope, but it isn't some kind of giant umbrella that protects us from all pain.

But there is hope. Even as the sun beats down, in that very same moment, the kingdom of God provides rest and shade and food.

It provides healing and hope and new life in the midst of pain and suffering. That's the good news.

The Old Testament book of Job is one source that both Christians and Jews turn to for explanations to human suffering and pain.

Job is a stunning ancient text, possibly the first Bible book ever written, maybe even by Moses. It helps us engage with both the conceptual problems of

suffering and the human, interpersonal, intimate-level experiences. The misery of innocent, defenceless, and good people is a very real dilemma.

Job is a righteous man who lives a blameless and upright life; fearing God and shunning evil. In spite of this, he suffers greatly. He loses livestock, friends, property, health, and his sons and daughters. One calamity is added to the next.

In the story, Job's three friends come to ‘comfort’ him in his suffering. Job's friends believed in a doctrine of divine retribution — a belief that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked in this life. But Job questioned this theology when his experience seemed in blatant contradiction to its proposals and convictions.

Some people embrace the doctrine of divine retribution, in order to explain pain and suffering, to understand, control, and protect God's image as both omnipotent and good, to preserve religious and theological traditions or to use an ethical or moral motivation for what is happening to them and others.

However, this doctrine of divine retribution has some disconcerting results, including the condemnation of fellow human beings, the sufferer is forced to blame

him or herself, God is relegated to the position of adversary and, sadly, no satisfactory answer is provided for the sufferer

The book of Job denies the doctrine of divine retribution.

Job's friends hold rigidly to this doctrine and encourage Job to repent. They say that if he repents, he'll escape his suffering and receive God's blessing.

In doing so, they unwittingly endeavour to tempt him to use God for his personal gain, which is the essence of sin.

If Job had followed their counsel, he would have vindicated his accusers who claimed that human beings seek personal gain in their worship of God.

Using the words of the three ‘comforters’, the author of Job strongly denounces the practice of using deceptive arguments to defend God.

Although the book of Job offers no definitive answer to the problem of human misery, the issue is ventilated, and partial answers are offered by Job's friends.

But, in the end we cannot discover from the book any one clear view about what the reason for our own particular suffering may be, nor any comforting statement about the reason for human suffering in general; for the book is entirely about the suffering of one particular and unique individual.

Job reminds us that suffering isn't about divine judgement. The innocent & righteous will and do suffer.

The book of Job doesn't deny that some sufferers deserve suffering occasionally. Yet, it contradicts the idea that this is always the case. Job exemplifies the innocent sufferer, whose innocence is asserted by the story's narrator, the holy God, and himself.

The book of Job tells us that the righteous and innocent may suffer terribly, and that adverse circumstances do not necessarily witness to an individual's moral corruption. Righteous and innocent people may suffer deeply in every sphere of life (physical, social, spiritual, and emotional).

We need to forget those clever answers to the meaning of suffering because Job doesn't portray the suffering of the righteous, innocent, and good as something that's necessarily cleansing, educational,

testing, or edifying.

The author upholds the goodness of both God and Job.

But human will, the laws of nature, human sin, freedom of choice and the brokenness of the world all combine to contribute to the suffering of the innocent; exonerating God and the sufferer from responsibility.

An Hungarian Proverb tells us that Adam and Eve ate the apple and our teeth still ache.

Yet, even these ‘clever’ explanations don't heal the wounds nor satisfy the objections of the millions who suffering.

The mistake of Job's friends was that they offered complicated and erroneous explanations to an innocent sufferer who, in fact, needed comfort, support, and sympathy. He didn't need their clichéd or ‘clever’ answers.

What we learn from Job is that God is not predictable, and it is completely acceptable to question God when we are in pain.

The problem of suffering (as distinct from the

experience of suffering) is a problem for the monotheist only.

A monotheist is one who believes only in one true God. Only the monotheist asks, "How can the one true God be omnipotent, good, and compassionate when the innocent and righteous suffer?"

A polytheistic, pantheistic, or atheistic view of the world doesn't need to ask such a question.

For the monotheist, misery has a moral or ethical quality attached to it. It is perceived as bad, wrong, and unjust, and it needs to be reconciled with our understanding of the one good God.

The book of Job is about his wrestling with the meaning of human misery.

In the book, Job is never condemned for questioning God. In desperate anguish he gropes for answers in the dark abyss of his misery. He laments his bitter feelings and grievous calamities. He cries to God for a response.

Job questions God vigorously — not in a logical or consistent manner, but in one motivated by grief and inner turmoil. I guess that we could say that Job

legitimates for sincere believers our ambiguous feelings toward God and religion when we suffer intensely for no discernible reason.

Job is convinced that he's become a mockery to his neighbour. He knows that, although he is blameless, he is a laughing stock, while (quote) "the tents of robbers are prosperous, and those who provoke God are secure."

He is sure that the beasts, birds, reptiles, and fish will testify that God is to blame for his calamity. He asks, "Which of all these does not know that the hand of God has done this? In his hand is the soul of every living thing, and the life breath of all humankind."

Job exclaims that God negates the expectations of the religious establishment.

God makes fools of judges, silences trusted advisers, and takes discretion away from the aged.

Job, based on this evidence, concludes: "I want to speak with the Almighty; I wish to reason with God."

God then allows Job to question him unashamedly, forthrightly, and openly.

God is more offended by unauthentic piety or dogmatic orthodoxy than by those who love him and who ask him direct questions-including questions about the meaning of their misery.

God doesn't require that we repress our anger or grief. He doesn't require us to settle for petty or trite answers about the nature, meaning, and origins of evil and suffering.

The book of Job legitimates our quest for self-understanding and meaning, while at the same time encouraging us to display emotional integrity and candour in our relationships with God and others. It also validates our moments of scepticism in the face of commonly accepted certainties as well as pessimism as a frank response to an implacable experience, and perhaps even cynicism in reaction to unfair abuse from others.

Once Job has aired his criticisms and questions of God, he encounters God's majesty and is overwhelmed that God would even reason with him. In his encounter with God, he finds profound personal meaning, amidst undeserved suffering and ambiguity.

God responded to Job's cries of anguish in this

encounter.

This is because the author of the book of Job believes that God responds to human misery-sometimes incomprehensibly, often unfathomably, but never negligibly.

God responds to Job's questioning. But, he doesn't do it in a manner that would silence through fear, persuade by love, placate with logical explanations, or bribe in order to keep Job silent.

Instead, God responds in the divine-human encounter, allowing Job to glimpse the respective places of God and human beings in the universe.

The book tells us that God permits evil and chaos for a season, but that they are kept in a leash.

In the face of suffering and injustice, human beings have the responsibility to pursue and display morality, compassion, justice, freedom, and hope.

The book of Job is scathing of Job's friends, and their easy, clever, and clichéd answers to the problem of evil and suffering.

Job shows us that when people suffer we should

listen to them compassionately, instead of offering them clichéd answers that do not satisfy their pain.

We also learn that we should trust in the goodness of God to work everything out in the end.

The message of the book is that there's no rigid answer to these difficult questions and it's acceptable to question God.

We don't have to settle for superficial answers to the problem of suffering and evil.

Life is full of contradictions and pain. The righteous and innocent sufferer may find hope and peace in trusting God, even if we can't find satisfactory answers to our painful questions.

So, where is God when it hurts — if God takes pleasure in us, then why do the innocent suffer?

Here are some responses.

Firstly, God Suffers. The Bible shows us a God who is not distanced from human suffering. God himself suffers.

And he suffers greatly. Jesus experienced

profound suffering: physical (from hunger, weariness, flogging, crucifixion), emotional (he wept for Lazarus, and he grieved for the fall of his people), and mental and spiritual (such as his agony in the garden and his torment on the Cross).

Jesus identifies with innocent sufferers because he himself was an innocent sufferer.

Philip Yancey write that, "Suffering can never ultimately be meaningless, because God himself has shared it".

Paul describes Christ as our intercessor in heaven who deeply understands, shares, and experiences our sufferings — because he himself has suffered. God himself is a suffering God. He's the 'crucified God'.

God won't know the end of his pain and heartbreak over our suffering until the restoration of all things through Christ (i.e. the second coming). We are not alone in our pain, for when we suffer he suffers with us.

Secondly, God is present in our suffering (and suffering shapes us). Since God is involved in our suffering, he is able to work through it for our good

(even though suffering is never good in itself).

Since God's presence is with us when we suffer, even though he may not be the cause of the suffering, he may use suffering to draw us to himself, develop in us Christian maturity, and to accomplish his purposes

As CS Lewis once famously wrote, "God whispers to us in out pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Although suffering can lead us to humility and dependency on God, suffering can also lead us to final and unrepentant rebellion.

Suffering can also break down our wrong ideas about God.

Suffering can (but doesn't always) lead to hope.

And suffering only makes sense in the light of the final chapter-the new heaven and new earth in Jesus Christ.

The choice is ours how we respond to suffering

"Is this a result of my sin or lifestyle, and if so

what should I change?" (Note that the answer here may be yes, but it's more often no. Often, it's the righteous and innocent who suffer).

"Is God trying to speak to me in the midst of this suffering?" (Not causing the suffering, but speaking to me in the midst of it).

Once we've asked those questions, here are some things we can do, although I recognize how difficult some of these things are, especially when we're in physical pain and emotional anguish.

We can hold on to the promise that God is with us in our suffering and cling to the hope of eternal healing.

We can show others compassion in their suffering and refuse to offer sufferers simplistic or clichéd answers.

We can pray for healing (which may or may not come through prayer, depending on the will of God) and if appropriate we can change our lifestyles and habits to harmonise them with God's will for us.

It is His delight in us that caused Christ to endure the suffering of the Cross, and that causes God to be

both a ‘suffering God’ and a ‘crucified God.’

He offers us eternal freedom from pain and suffering, even though we often suffer greatly in this lifetime. He is present with us in our suffering. He brings comfort, hope, loving friends, and, sometimes, but not always, even physical healing.

The New Testament brings an additional perspective to our understanding of suffering: the perspective of eternity. Paul wrote, "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that will be revealed in us."

This life is like a drop of water in the ocean compared with our eternal peace, joy, and wholeness with God.

Such thoughts don't always comfort us when we suffer, or when we've lost someone we love. But, at times, such hope does help make the suffering of this life more bearable — and direct our hearts and minds to our eternal hope in Jesus Christ.

Suffering only makes sense in the light of the final chapter — the restoration of all things, at the end of the age, in Jesus Christ.

I wish I could say that, like transient physical pain, any emotional pain you feel will disappear, vanish, never to return.

I'm sure you've heard comments like these from parents and others: "Things will get better." "You'll get past this." "This too shall pass."

Those who offer such comfort mean well, and it's true that what you feel now you will not always feel.

In my own personal experiences of grief and loss and pain I am reminded of these lines from George Herbert that gave me comfort: "Grief melts away / Like snow in May / As if there were no such cold thing."

I cling to that hope even as grief smothers me like an avalanche. Indeed, the grief and pain will melt away, but like snow it also comes back, in fierce and unexpected ways, triggered by a sound, a smell, some fragment of memory.

The Christian humorist Barbara Johnson wrote, "Pain is inevitable for all of us, but misery is optional".

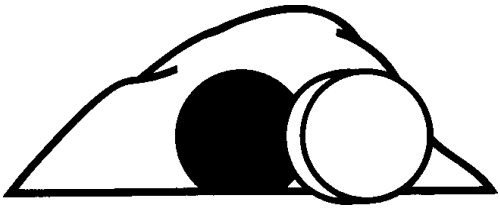
Likewise the singer and songwriter Rodney Crowell sang, "Pain comes like the weather, but joy is

a choice".

It is in times such as these that I can truly say, along with George Frederic Handel and Isaiah, "I know that my Redeemer liveth,

And on the earth again shall stand;
I know eternal life He giveth,
That grace and power are in His hand.

I know, I know that Jesus liveth,
And on the earth again shall stand;
I know, I know that life He giveth,
That grace and power are in His hand."



"I know that my Redeemer liveth”

"When God seems distant"

Chapter 5: When God Seems Distant

Psalm 13, (Psalms 13) "To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David. How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me?
2) How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? how long shall mine enemy be exalted over me?
3) Consider and hear me, O Lord my God: lighten mine eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death;
4) Lest mine enemy say, I have prevailed against him; and those that trouble me rejoice when I am moved.
5) But I have trusted in thy mercy; my heart shall rejoice in thy salvation.
6) I will sing unto the Lord, because he hath dealt bountifully with me."

Harry Emerson Fosdick was a national radio personality, a teacher and preacher in the early part of the last century.

He once did a sermon explaining his belief in God. He said that when he was a boy, he would look out the window and watch the branches and leaves on the tree move. He would sense the wind blowing, and

he put it together.

He concluded that it was the moving of the branches that he could see that caused the movement of the wind that he could not see. But he explained that when he grew to adulthood, he understood it differently, discovering that it was the wind he could not see that moved the branches that he could see.

Author Leith Anderson, commenting on this incident, says, "So it is that this great, invisible God is as real as anything else we count to be reality. Invisibility makes him no less real, no less powerful, no less present. He's like the wind — the wind that blows where it pleases and chooses, the wind that makes things happen. He makes things happen. He is close; he is not distant."

No matter who we are, when we are in pain or when our world seems to be crumbling around us, we may ask, "Where is God?"

There are even times in the life of the Christian, when even though you are walking by faith and there is no known deliberate sin in your life, God seems far away. You pray, but God doesn't seem to answer. You read the Bible, but it does not speak to you. You seek

God, but it seems as if He is hiding.

When that happens, you're in good company. King David, the man whom through the Holy Bible God called "a man after My own heart," had that experience.

David describes it in Psalm 13. Out of the depths of his heart David repeats four times the haunting cry, "How long?" There is no indication in these verses that David had deliberately sinned. But his enemy was about to get him.

In spite of David's repeated prayers, God seemed unavailable. Have you ever been there? You desperately call out to God, but He seems to have taken an extended vacation. Psalm 13 tells us what to do when God seems distant.

Psalm 13 falls into three stanzas of two verses each. Verses 1 and 2 outline the problem. Verses 3 and 4 present the petition and verses 5 and 6 conclude with the praise.

In a phrase, Psalm 13 is saying: When God seems distant, we must call to Him and trust in His unfailing love.

At those times when it seems as if God has turned His back, we must deliberately trust the fact that He loves us with an unfailing love, and that He will not forsake us, even though it may seem that way for a while.

Let's examine the three parts of the psalm, starting with the problem that God seems distant.

Psalm 13, verses 1 and 2 read, " How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?"

It seemed as if God had forgotten David, had hidden Himself from him, and as if it would last forever. It always seems as if a time of intense trial lasts forever, doesn't it?

The hard thing about waiting is that you have to wait! Don't you hate to wait?

A son calls his mother: "Hi, Mum - how are you?"

Mum replies: "Not too good. I haven't eaten in 38 days."

Replying with concern, the son asks, "What's the matter, Mum? Are you not feeling well? Have you been to the doctor?"

Mum replies: "It's not that - I just didn't want to have my mouth full of food when you called."

Waiting is hard.

I'm not 100% sure, but if this psalm was written when David was being pursued by Saul, then David had a lot of time on his hands. He was holed up out in the desolate wilderness of Judah. The hours, days, weeks, and months dragged on as David waited for God to act.

Sometimes it seems as if God moves so slowly! We live in a day that says, "Hurry, hurry, hurry!" But so often God says, "Wait! Wait! Wait!"

Most of us can relate to a comment by the New England preacher, Phillips Brooks. Normally, he was a calm man. But one day he was clearly agitated. He paced the floor like a caged lion.

A friend asked him, "What's the trouble?"

Brooks replied, "The trouble is, I'm in a hurry,

but God isn't."

Richard Hendrix wrote, "Second only to suffering, waiting may be the greatest teacher and trainer in godliness, maturity, and genuine spirituality most of us ever encounter."

Have you ever noticed the difference between God's timetable and ours? We think in terms of minutes, hours, and days, but God works in terms of years.

That's what David was going through. He had been anointed as king by the prophet Samuel when he was a teenager. But 1st Samuel chapter 26 tells us that Saul was pursuing him like a bird in the mountains. David was perhaps now in his late twenties.

This had been going on for years! Where was God? Had God forgotten about David?

Perhaps you can relate to that. When God seems distant, it always affects our emotions.

David, for example, got to thinking that his enemies were winning.

Saul was still the king. He was enjoying the comforts of the palace, while David was sleeping in

caves. What made it worse, Saul was the bad guy! He wasn't seeking the Lord; David was.

Saul was trying to kill David without cause, even though David had spared Saul's life.

Didn't God know what was happening? Couldn't God do something? Had He forgotten about David?

Have you ever been there? Perhaps you are there now? You're in an extended time of trial and you call out to God but He doesn't seem to answer.

You try to figure out how to get out of your circumstances, but nothing works.

You go from the heights of hope to the depths of despair so many times that your system can't take much more.

Meanwhile, those who aren't following the Lord are living the good life in the palace while you're seeking the Lord from the cave.

There are two vital lessons to remember at such a time…

The first lesson is that God has not forgotten

you. We read in Hebrews 13:5 - "...[God] Himself has said, 'I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you'".

But God does seemingly forget some of His choicest servants. Joseph, Paul, David - all of them were shut up in unpleasant circumstances for years during which it seemed that God had forgotten them.

Do you know what was happening during that time? God was building maturity into those men as they learned to trust Him.

Just as it takes years to grow a sturdy oak tree, so it takes years to build a godly character. That's the first lesson.

The second lesson is that there is no such thing as instant godliness.

We are bombarded with advertisements for instant coffee, instant cameras, instant loans, instant everything it seems. But there is no instant godliness.

David was anointed as king in his teens. He had a strong faith at that time, as seen in his victory over Goliath. Did God put him on the throne shortly after his Bar Mitzvah at age 12?

Through all those years of running from Saul and living in caves, David learned to wait upon God. God was developing His man.

That's how God works. If God has you shut up in some frustrating circumstances; and you have racked your brain trying to figure a way out, but nothing has worked; and you see the godless prospering while you suffer; and it seems like God is far away; hang on!

Let God do His perfect work in you. He hasn't forgotten you. Learn to wait on Him.

The second part of Psalm 13 is the petition where we call to the Lord.

Verses 3 & 4 read, "Look on me and answer, O Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death; my enemy will say, 'I have overcome him,' and my foes will rejoice when I fall."

Do you know why many Christians do not grow to maturity and why they are not used by God in a mighty way?

It's because when God seems distant to them, instead of calling out to Him, they just shrug their shoulders, say "Oh, well," and go back into living life

as usual.

David didn't do that. When God seemed distant, he called on Him to answer him.

Instead of turning from God, he turned to Him. Instead of complaining to men about God, David complained to God about men.

In a time of crisis, you can call out to God to rescue you, not just for your relief, but for God's glory. God delights to honour such prayers.

David was sensitive to the presence of God in his life.

If he lost the sense of God's presence, he went after it with urgency.

The test of our faith is not when God's presence is real, when we see God at work in our life. The authentic test of our faith is when God seems distant.

Do we seek Him then? If we seek Him, we will find Him, but if we turn to the world or look for a quick fix for our problems without seeking God, we won't easily find Him. Seek God especially when He seems distant.

Sometimes God seems distant and allows us to go right to the brink, to come to the end of ourselves, so that we learn to trust Him more.

Whatever their intensity, all trials are designed to bring us to a deeper trust in the Lord. If we dodge them without learning that lesson, we missed what God had for us. David came to that point of trust.

Thus, we see that David's problem led to his petition, which led to his praise:

Psalm 13 concludes with Praise where we choose to trust in God's unfailing love

Verses 5and 6 of Psalm 13 read, "But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, for he has been good to me."

David has not yet been delivered, but he trusts in the loving-kindness and unfailing love of God, and a calm assurance comes over him.

His heart is filled with joy as he thinks of the deliverance that God will bring about.

By faith, David counts God's future deliverance as past and says, "I will sing to the Lord, for he has

been good to me."

Please note that David's circumstances had not changed one bit from the start of the psalm, when he felt confused, depressed, and forsaken by God. David was still hiding in caves; Saul was still on the throne, trying to kill David.

So what changed? David's focus! From focusing on himself and his problems at the start of the psalm, David shifted his thoughts to God's loyal love and salvation.

That shift in focus moved him from confusion and depression to joy and praise!

This Hebrew word for trust has the nuance of relying or leaning upon someone or something.

You ask, "Then is God a crutch?" Maybe, for we're all spiritual cripples!

One of the main reasons people do not trust God is that they're too proud to admit their total need.

Or they mistakenly think that they must earn God's love.

But His love does not stem from any merit on our part, but only from God's nature. Thus it is pure grace, undeserved on our part.

Since God's love stems from His unchanging nature rather than from our feeble effort, we can trust in it.

The famous preacher, Charles Spurgeon, was walking through the English countryside with a friend.

He noticed a barn with a weather vane. At the top of the vane were the words, "God is love."

Spurgeon remarked that this was an inappropriate place for such a message, because weather vanes are changeable, but God's love is constant.

But Spurgeon's friend disagreed. "You misunderstood the meaning," he said. "That weather vane is stating the truth that no matter which way the wind blows, God is love."

When God seems distant, join David in deliberately trusting in God's unfailing love, however the winds of circumstance are blowing.

As David wrote in Psalm 103:11: "As high as

the heavens are above the earth, so great is His loving-kindness toward those who fear Him." You can count on it, even when your circumstances seem contrary.

He is only taking you through the difficulty to develop maturity and godly character. "But it's been months! Years!" Yes, that's the way He works. He builds things to last, and that takes time. But the finished product is so much better in quality than quick imitations that don't develop trust in the living God.

Charles R. Swindoll wrote, "God is no distant deity but a constant reality, a very present help whenever needs occur. So? So live like it."

If you are distant from God because of known sin, the answer is the same: Call out to Him and put your trust in His unfailing love as demonstrated in the cross of Jesus Christ. He died as your substitute, taking the penalty you deserved.

If you will flee to Him for refuge, He will never turn you away.

Malcolm Muggeridge confessed, "God the Father is both far away and near at hand; his voice is, at once, deafening in its thunderousness, and too still and

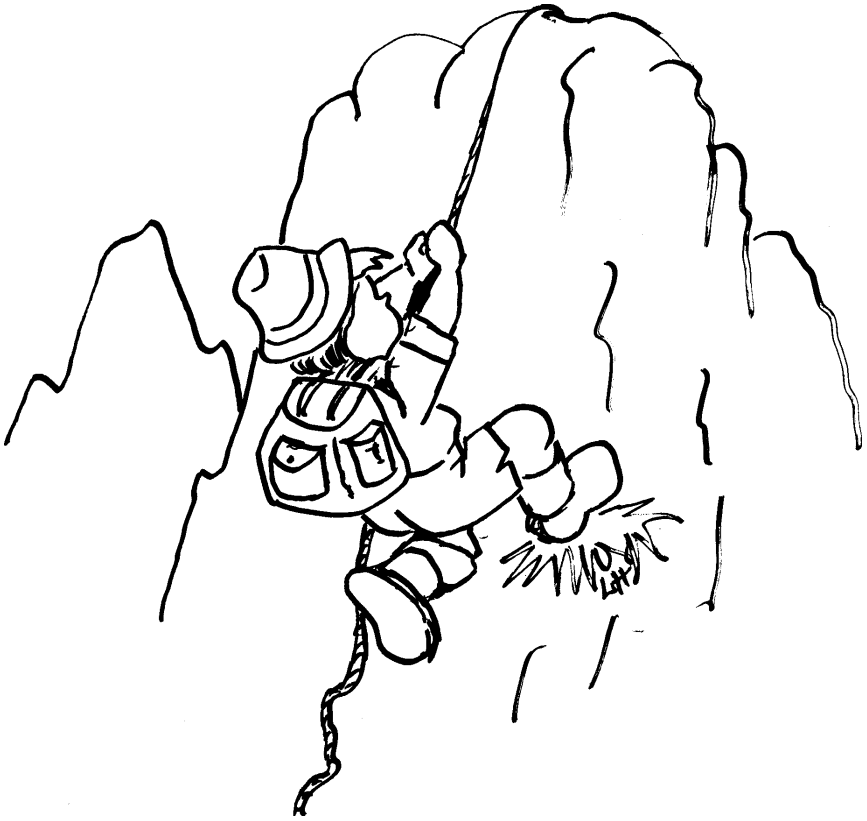
small to be easily audible."

When God seems distant, ponder the words of Cardinal John Henry Newman who lived from 1801 to 1890.

He says of the distant scene that one step is enough to reach God. Here are his actual words:

Lead, kindly Light,
amid the encircling gloom,
lead thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home;
lead thou me on!
Keep thou my feet;
I do not ask to see the distant scene;
one step enough for me.

May you reach out, take that one step, and sense the nearness of God as you wait on Him today.



"One step enough for me."

Chapter 6: Disease of Discouragement

(2 Corinthians 1:3-5) "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort;

4) Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.

5) For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ."

I would like to start with an extract on encouragement from AA Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*.

'One day Pooh Bear is about to go for a walk in the Hundred Acre wood. It's about 11:30 in the morning. It is a fine time to go calling - just before lunch.

So Pooh sets out across the stream, stepping on the stones, and when he gets right in the middle of the stream he sits down on a warm stone and thinks about just where would be the best place of all to make a call.

He says to himself, "I think I'll go see Tigger." No, he dismisses that.

Then he says, "Owl!" Then, "No, Owl uses big words, hard-to-understand words."

At last he brightens up! "I know! I think I'll go see Rabbit. I like Rabbit. Rabbit uses encouraging words like, 'How's about lunch?' and 'Help yourself, Pooh!' Yes, I think I'll go see Rabbit.'"

That's encouragement. What about the opposite: discouragement?

John Yates, shares a parable in an article entitled *'An Attitude of Gratitude'*.

Yates wrote, "I read once that the Devil was having a yard sale, and all of his tools were marked with different prices. They were a fiendish lot. There was hatred, jealously, deceit, lying, pride — all at expensive prices.

But over to the side of the yard on display was a tool more obviously worn than any of the other tools. It was also the most costly. The tool was labelled, 'Discouragement'.

When questioned, the Devil said, "It's more useful to me than any other tool. When I can't bring down my victims with any of the rest of these tools, I use discouragement, because so few people realise that it belongs to me."

During the Boer War of 1899-1902, a man was convicted of a very unusual crime. He was found guilty of being a discourager.

The South African town of Ladysmith was under attack, and this traitor would move up and down the lines of soldiers who were defending the city and do everything he could to discourage them. He would point out the enemy's strength, the difficulty of defending against them, and the inevitable capture of the city.

He didn't use a gun in his attack. It wasn't necessary. His weapon was the power of discouragement.

The theologian Bruce Thielemann shared the following observation, "Not too long ago, the Hayden Planetarium in New York City issued an invitation to all those who were interested in applying to be a part of the crew on the first journey to another planet. Eighteen thousand people applied.

They gave the applications to a panel of psychologists, who examined them thoroughly and came to the conclusion that in the vast majority of incidents, those who applied did so because they were discouraged with their lives here and hoped they could find a new life somewhere else."

Here's a man sitting on his porch in Kentucky, USA. He's only recently retired from the post office, and he's sitting there when his first Social Security cheque is delivered.

He's very, very discouraged. He thinks to himself, "Is this what life is going to be from now on — sitting on the porch waiting for my cheque to arrive?"

He decided he wouldn't settle for that, and so he made a list of all of the things he had going for him — all the blessings and the capacities, the unique things that were in him.

The list was long because he listed everything he could think of and on the list was the fact that he was the only surviving person on earth who knew his mother's herb and spice recipe for fried chicken.

So he went to a nearby restaurant and offered to

cook the chicken, and they said yes. It soon became the most popular item on the menu. So he opened his own restaurant, and then others, and a string of restaurants.

Eventually Harland Sanders sold the Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise across all of America and the globally.

He finally retired a second time (all this happened, you remember, after he had retired from the postal service), and he continued in the service of the company as a public relations representative for a quarter of a million dollars a year till his death.

Now here was a man who did not allow himself to be defeated by discouragement.

He took a look at it, recognized it was there, but then went on to look at what he had with which to deal with it and used that.

When life is tiring, when we are struggling with some sin, when family members are complicated, when bills aren't paid, when studying is difficult, when chores are exhausting, when our health is not good, when our loved ones are hurt, when the future is unsure, and when a good friend leaves, it is easy to be discouraged.

The Franciscans were the first peoples to systematically grow grapes in California. They grew the Muscat grapes to make Muscatel wine.

One year they had a terrible drought, and the grapes withered on the vine. They thought they were going to lose them all, but they took those dried-up withered grapes down into the towns and sold them as what they called "Peruvian delicacies." That was the beginning of the Sun Maid Raisin Company.

The theologian Dick Winn wrote, "Discouragement is the anaesthesia the devil uses before he cuts your heart out".

Discouragement is a thief. It steals our vitality, our zeal, our joy, our peace, and our contentment.

If discouragement dwells long, its gloomy companions will soon join it. Their names are fatigue, hopelessness, despair, self-pity, depression, doubt, and bitterness. For some people, discouragement can be so strong that they even don't want to go on living.

The year was 1772. One of those almost impenetrable fogs had settled down over the city of London.

In a dismal flat in the heart of the crowded East End, William Cowper (pronounced 'Cooper') stood gazing into the fireplace. Then suddenly, overcome by emotions of discouragement, gripped by fears that he could not name, he threw his cloak about him and walked resolutely toward the door. He turned the key and walked out into the night.

Carefully he groped his way across the pavement and felt for the iron horse's head and the ring of the hitching post. Then, guided by the kerbstone, he made his way to the nearest corner, where he knew a horse-drawn cab was always waiting.

He opened its door and ordered the driver, "To the Thames, sir!" For in his deep depression there seemed no way out but to jump from the bridge.

It should have taken 15 minutes, but after an hour and a half of negotiating the dark and foggy streets they realized they were hopelessly lost. In desperation, he decided to walk and paid the driver his fare.

But as he alighted, his arm struck a familiar object. It was the iron horse's head of the hitching post that to him was so familiar. After an hour and a half of fitful wandering he had alighted in front of his own

home.

So impressed was he, that he climbed the stairs to his flat, lit the lamp, and knelt to ask God to forgive him for what he had thought to do.

And then, there in that same room that had so lately overcome him with its gloom, he wrote these words:
"God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.
Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; the clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy, and shall break in blessings on your head.
Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace; behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.
His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour; the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower.
Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain."

I recall reading in the second book of the Conflict of the Ages Series titled 'Prophets and Kings' these words: "Into the experience of all there come times of

keen disappointment and utter discouragement — days when sorrow is the portion, and it is hard to believe that God is still the kind benefactor of His earthborn children; days when troubles harass the soul, till death seems preferable to life."

"It is then that many lose their hold on God and are brought into the slavery of doubt, the bondage of unbelief. Could we at such times discern with spiritual insight the meaning of God's providences we should see angels seeking to save us from ourselves, striving to plant our feet upon a foundation more firm than the everlasting hills, and new faith, new life, would spring into being."

Discouragement can be a dissatisfaction with the past, a distaste for the present, and a distrust of the future.

Discouragement is sometimes the result of blindness resulting in ingratitude for the blessings of yesterday, indifference to the opportunities of today, and insecurity regarding strength for tomorrow.

It is often accompanied by an absence of an awareness of the presence of God and the promises of His Word, coupled with a lack of concern for the needs

of our fellow man.

When Thomas Carlyle, English essayist and historian, finished his first volume of *'The French Revolution'*, he handed the manuscript to John Stuart Mill for critiquing.

Mill read the manuscript, then lent it to a friend. The friend left it lying on a study table one night after reading it.

Early the next morning the housemaid, groping around for something with which to start a fire, found the loose mass of papers and, thinking it was discarded trash, used it for kindling.

What had taken Carlyle years to write was gone.

When Mill, white as a sheet, reported the devastating news to Carlyle, the latter was so staggered by his loss that he could do nothing for weeks.

Then one day, as he sat by his open window, brooding over his terrible loss, he noticed a mason rebuilding a brick wall.

Patiently the man laid brick upon brick, all the while whistling a happy tune.

Poor fool, thought Carlyle, how can you be so merry when life is so futile?

Then suddenly another thought struck him. Poor fool, said he of himself, here you sit at your window whining and complaining while that man rebuilds a house that will last for generations.

Rising from his chair, Carlyle went to work on his second draft of *'The French Revolution'*.

According to his own account and those who had had an opportunity to read both versions of his work, the latter was a better product.

The destruction of our cherished dreams does not have to be the end of the world. It could be the beginning of something better!

Be encouraged because God is a God of mercy and comfort.

Verse 3 of chapter one of second Corinthians reads, "Blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort".

God is called the Father of Mercies.

Now the second word in most English translation is not in the original.

So some translations, such as the King James Version insert the word '*be*', thus reading, "Blesséd *be* God".

Others, equally accurate but rendering a very different meaning, insert the word '*by*', thus reading, "Blessed *by* God". In one we are praising God, in the other we are acknowledging that He is blessing us.

Whatever the apostle Paul's intent, one thing is very clear, and that is that God is even more worthy of our praise because of the unconditional way that he has mercy on us.

In the Greek the word ‘mercy’ means, of course, mercy but also compassion and pity. These are emotions that are felt in the heart.

In God's very heart, He feels mercy toward you and me.

God is the author of mercy. Psalm 86:5 tells us, "You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you."

God's mercy toward us brings us comfort, peace, salvation, the forgiveness of sins and deliverance from eternal separation.

And all of this is because of Jesus, because of His sacrifice and because of His shed blood for me and you.

The word in Greek for ‘comfort’ is '*paraklesis*.' It means, exhortation, comfort, and encouragement.

In fact, a form of this word, '*parakletos*' is used to describe the Holy Spirit. That is why the Holy Spirit is called the Comforter in John 14:26. In some translations the word is rendered ‘Helper’.

All this shows us that God is a God of comfort, of exhortation, and of encouragement.

All comfort comes from God who is the God of comfort, of mercy, and love.

It isn't an angel, or a cosmic force, a pill, a psychological therapy, or a quick and clever slogan that warms your heart and lifts you up. It is God.

But you may ask, "How is this comfort received from God?"

Here are four ways:

Firstly, by faith. Because God says He is the God of comfort, then we need to believe it and act upon it; that is, we need to trust Him and receive His comfort as He provides it, in the way that He sees best, remembering that He loves us.

Secondly, from others. God uses godly people to comfort you and me. When you have a problem, do not be afraid to ask the Lord to send someone with an encouraging word, a helping hand, or a shoulder to cry on.

Thirdly, through His word. Reading and hearing the words of sacred scripture can be inspiring if done prayerfully. The words of God are beautiful and are there for our instruction and encouragement.

And fourthly, by the Holy Spirit. He is called the Comforter. Invite Him into your life.

Take encouragement also because God is there in your afflictions.

Verse 4 of chapter one of second Corinthians reads, "who comforts us in all our affliction . . . . so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any

affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

‘Affliction’ in the New American Standard Bible, ‘tribulation’ in the Authorised version, ‘trouble in the New International Version are all from the Greek word '*thlipsis*'. It can be translated as tribulation, trouble, anguish, persecution, burden, and, of course, affliction.

Afflictions come in all different shapes and sizes. Sickness, financial difficulty, loss of a loved one, an unsure future, an motor vehicle accident. But also can occur in the heart in that place where we get frustrated, confused, and hurt.

Norman Vincent Peale in *'The Power of the Plus Factor'* wrote, 'Once walking through the twisted little streets of Kowloon in Hong Kong, I came upon a tattoo studio.

In the window were displayed samples of the tattoos available. On the chest or arms you could have tattooed an anchor or flag or mermaid or whatever. But what struck me with force were three words that could be tattooed on one's flesh, *Born to lose*.

I entered the shop in astonishment and, pointing

to those words, asked the Chinese tattoo artist, "Does anyone really have that terrible phrase, *Born to lose*, tattooed on his body?"

He replied, "Yes, sometimes."

"But," I said, "I just can't believe that anyone in his right mind would do that."

The Chinese man simply tapped his forehead and said in broken English, "Before tattoo on body, tattoo on mind.'"

We have afflictions because we live in a fallen world and it takes a world with trouble in it to really develop our character.

A sailer never learns to sail by staying in the safety of the harbour.

James 1:2-4 says, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

So then, afflictions are a way of making us better, not bitter.

And that is how they should be tackled: as the testing and strengthening of our faith and character through the comfort and mercy of God.

We can also be encouraged because we can be instruments of comfort to others.

Again I quote from verse 4 of chapter one of second Corinthians, " . . . so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

It glorifies God to comfort others, and being used by God makes us feel good.

Of course that isn't the only reason to help someone, but it does feel good when the Holy Spirit uses us to do good to others.

I guess we ought to praise God that we even have afflictions so that we can be able to help others.

Many of us, because we have been through a trial, have been able to help another person who is experiencing a similar trial.

God does not comfort us to make us

comfortable, but to make us comforters.

The building of lighthouses are encouraged by shipwrecked sailors.

The impetus behind the construction of retaining walls is from those who have suffered by landslides.

The widened of roads are urged by injured motorists or their hurting families.

The building of levee banks is motivated by the victims of floods.

The provision of hospitals and ambulances are encouraged by those who are sick.

The establishment of fire brigades are lobbied by those who have suffered by fire.

Where nobody suffers, nobody cares. When we suffer we learn to care.

That is why God does not comfort us to make us comfortable, but to make us comforters … and He suffered first, long before we were even born.

Praise God that His love is never measured by

our comfort.

In 430 B.C. the historian Thucydides wrote, "It was in those who had recovered from the plague that the sick and the dying found most compassion."

And finally, we should be encouraged because the comfort we receive from God comes through Christ.

Verse 5 reads, "For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ."

This means that all comfort, encouragement, and hope that we receive through people, through the Word, or through circumstances are a blessing from God.

Martin Luther once was so depressed over a prolonged period that one day his wife came downstairs wearing all black.

Martin Luther said, "Who died?" She said, "God has."

Luther said, "God hasn't died."

And his wife retorted, "Well, live like it and act like it."

We don't have to worry whether or not God is going to take care of us. He already has through the cross, He is currently doing so, and He will continue to care for us.

After all, He cares for the sparrows and he reminds us that we are more valuable than they.

(Matthew 10:29-31) "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows."

(Luke 12:6-7) "Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God? 7) But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows."

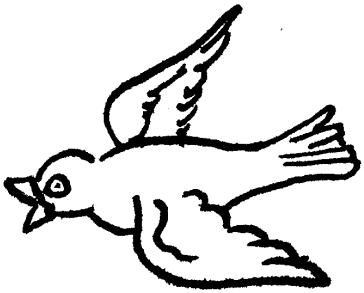
In 1905, Civilla D. Martin wrote a poem that starts with some very relevant questions, "Why should I feel discouraged? Why should the shadows come? Why should my heart be lonely and long for heaven and home, When Jesus is my portion? My constant Friend is He. His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me"

In her poem she goes on to say:
"'Let not your heart be troubled,' His tender word I hear,
And resting on His goodness, I lose my doubts and fears;
Though by the path He leadeth, but one step I may see;
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.

Whenever I am tempted, whenever clouds arise,
When songs give place to sighing, when hope within me dies,
I draw the closer to Him, from care He sets me free;
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me;
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.

The second verse in a 1960s hymn by Omer Westendorf reads, "With praise and thanksgiving to God ever-living, the tasks of our everyday life we will face. Our faith ever sharing, in love ever caring, embracing His children of each tribe and race".

And then, addressing God, Westendorf wrote "With Your feast You feed us, With Your light now lead us Unite us as one in this life that we share. Then may all the living with praise and thanksgiving give honour to Christ and His name that we bear".



"I know He watches me."

Chapter 7: Wages for Worrying

Psalm 37, "A Psalm of David. Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity.

2) For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb.

3) Trust in the Lord, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed.

4) Delight thyself also in the Lord; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.

5) Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass.

6) And he shall bring forth thy righteousness as the light, and thy judgment as the noonday.

7) Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for him: fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in his way, because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass.

8) Cease from anger, and forsake wrath: fret not thyself in any wise to do evil.

9) For evildoers shall be cut off: but those that wait upon the Lord, they shall inherit the earth.

10) For yet a little while, and the wicked shall not be: yea, thou shalt diligently consider his place, and it shall not be.

11) But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace.

12) The wicked plotteth against the just, and gnasheth upon him with his teeth.

13) The Lord shall laugh at him: for he seeth that his day is coming.

14) The wicked have drawn out the sword, and have bent their bow, to cast down the poor and needy, and to slay such as be of upright conversation.

15) Their sword shall enter into their own heart, and their bows shall be broken.

16) A little that a righteous man hath is better than the riches of many wicked.

17) For the arms of the wicked shall be broken: but the Lord upholdeth the righteous.

18) The Lord knoweth the days of the upright: and their inheritance shall be for ever.

19) They shall not be ashamed in the evil time: and in the days of famine they shall be satisfied.

20) But the wicked shall perish, and the enemies of the Lord shall be as the fat of lambs: they shall consume; into smoke shall they consume away.

21) The wicked borroweth, and payeth not again: but the righteous showeth mercy, and giveth.

22) For such as be blessed of him shall inherit the earth; and they that be cursed of him shall be cut off.

23) The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord: and he delighteth in his way.

24) Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the Lord upholdeth him with his hand.

25) I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.

26) He is ever merciful, and lendeth; and his seed is blessed.

27) Depart from evil, and do good; and dwell for evermore.

28) For the Lord loveth judgment, and forsaketh not his saints; they are preserved for ever: but the seed of the wicked shall be cut off.

29) The righteous shall inherit the land, and dwell therein for ever.

30) The mouth of the righteous speaketh wisdom, and his tongue talketh of judgment.

31) The law of his God is in his heart; none of his steps shall slide.

32) The wicked watcheth the righteous, and seeketh to slay him.

33) The Lord will not leave him in his hand, nor condemn him when he is judged.

34) Wait on the Lord, and keep his way, and he shall exalt thee to inherit the land: when the wicked are cut off, thou shalt see it.

35) I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green bay tree.

36) Yet he passed away, and, lo, he was not: yea, I sought him, but he could not be found.

37) Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright: for the end of that man is peace.

38) But the transgressors shall be destroyed together: the end of the wicked shall be cut off.

39) But the salvation of the righteous is of the Lord: he is their strength in the time of trouble.

40) And the Lord shall help them, and deliver them: he shall deliver them from the wicked, and save them, because they trust in him."

A few years ago professional basketball athlete Michael Jordan was interviewed after a hard-fought play-off victory.

He had actually not played well in the first three quarters of the game, at least by Michael Jordan standards.

But in the fourth he had one of those scoring

explosions. He always seemed to be in the right place at the right time, flying at the hoop in one of those amazing gravity-defying leaps.

The reporter asked him what the difference was between the first three quarters and that last quarter.

Jordan thought for a moment and then said that in the first three quarters he was trying too hard, he wanted so badly to win the game. But then, Jordan said, "When I let the game come to me in the fourth quarter, we won."

During those first three quarters, Jordan had one thing in his mind: "We've got to win this game."

Every jump shot, every pick, every pivot; every attempted block was played with the anxious thought that the whole championship was on the line. Every turnover, every bounce off the rim, every gratuitous foul only increased his anxiety.

He played the first three quarters in a state of constant worry, or as the Psalmist calls it "fretting."

But then, in the final quarter, things changed. "I let the game come to me."

Obviously that didn't mean that Jordan lost interest in the game, or became uninvolved.

It means he started playing with a new attitude. Rather than fretting and worrying, he just entered the rhythm and the pace of the game.

He relaxed. He stopped trying to make things happen in his own predetermined way, but started to let things happen.

He shook off the inevitable mistakes, and seized the opportunities that came his way. He let the game come to him.

Letting the game come is more than the game-winning strategy of a great athlete, it's an important aspect of the deep wisdom that the Bible teaches.

It's not just a way of winning; it's a way of living. The Psalmist and Jesus describe it in terms of those two polar opposites between which we struggle to live our life of faith: worry and trust.

The theme of this Psalm was taken up in a sermon by none other than Jesus of Nazareth.

A portion of the Sermon on the Mount,

beginning in Matthew 6:25: "Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?

26) Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?

27) Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?

28) And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin:

29) And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

30) Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?

31) Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?

32) (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have

need of all these things.

33) But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

"Do not fret: says the Psalmist. Jesus said, "Take no thought for your life," in other words, "Do not worry."

It makes it sound so easy, but we all know that we spend lots of our precious lives worrying.

Some of you reading this may be anxious over finances. Others may be fighting disease or fearing an epidemic.

Parents worry about their children. Children worry about their parents.

Some may have relationships frayed to the breaking point.

We worry about lots of things, big and small. Much of our life is characterized by a kind of low-level anxiety that's there all the time like tinnitus or ringing in your ears.

We've got these little pictures in our head of all the things that can go wrong.

And we tend to see worry not as a sign of faithlessness, but as a sign that we care.

Don't misunderstand. The stance of trust the Bible advocates is not doing nothing.

It doesn't mean I wait for an employer to knock on my door if I'm out of work, or that I refuse to look at the ways in which I might understand and help fight a disease.

We are not asked to abdicate responsibility for what we can do and just let life happen to us.

It's not worry when we do what we can to change things for the better.

There is a difference between worry and concern. A worried person *sees* the problem; the concerned person *solves* the problem.

Charles F. Kettering wrote, "We should all be concerned about the future because we will have to spend the rest of our lives there."

Worry is anticipating what might happen. "Worry is interest paid on trouble before it is due."

It's running all the possible scenarios through your mind over and over.

The problem is, anything might happen. Our lives can be turned upside down in an instant.

Tragedies can happen in the blink of an eye, but take heart, God never blinks.

When you really think about all the possibilities, worry seems a perfectly logical response to life in an unpredictable world.

In one of her letters of spiritual direction, 16th century Christian writer Madame Guyon once wrote some very blunt words on worry. "If knowing answers to life's questions is absolutely necessary to you, then forget the journey. You will never make it, for this is a journey of unknowables-of unanswered questions, enigmas, incomprehensibles, and most of all, things unfair."

Worrying makes no sense. We fritter away our lives in a vain attempt at control the uncontrollable, to manage the unmanageable.

As Jesus so clearly puts it, worry never ever changes anything. No one has made their lives any

longer or improved their circumstances by worrying about them.

All worry does is rob us of whatever enjoyment we might have in the present moment. As Jesus said, "Today's troubles are enough for today" (Matthew 6: 34).

Many manufacturers today run their production lines on a just-in-time basis. The materials arrive at just the moment they are needed, rather than stockpiling them beforehand. That's the way God seems to run the world. Trust means that God will give us *what* we need *when* we need it.

In her powerful memoir '*The Hiding Place*', about life in wartime Netherlands, Corrie ten Boom tells the story of her first brush with death as a child.

A baby of a family friend had died, and Corrie's mother had taken her along to express sympathy with the family.

The dead child was still in its homemade crib while the visitors all stood around.

Corrie had never actually seen a dead body. She felt this terrible urge to touch the beautiful unmoving

doll-like infant, and reached out to touch that tiny curled hand with her finger.

It was cold, terribly cold. She seemed to carry that coldness with her the rest of the day, as though the icy feeling was creeping into her heart, and the possibility of death became terribly real.

That night, as every night, Corrie's father came into their room to say goodnight.

On seeing him Corrie burst into tears. "I need you!" she sobbed. "You can't die, you can't."

Her Father sat on the edge of the bed. "Corrie," he said gently, "when you and I go to Amsterdam, when do I give you the ticket?"

"Why just before we get on the train."

"Exactly. And our wise Father in heaven knows when we're going to need things too. Don't run ahead of him, Corrie. When the time comes that some of us will have to die, you will look into your heart and find the strength you need, just in time."

We need to ‘wait for the Lord,’ our just-in-time God.

Many of us worry about things that never happen.

It is like the patient in the mental hospital, holding his ear close to the wall, listening intently.

The attendant finally approached. "Shh!" whispered the patient, beckoning him over. The attendant pressed his ear to the wall for a long time. "I can't hear a thing," he finally said.

"No," replied the patient, "it's been like that all day!"

Happy is the man who is too busy to worry by day, and too sleepy to worry at night.

But the cost of worry is more than just wasting time or wasting life.

The Psalmist associates various other kinds of attitudes and sins with fretting. Here are just a few of the words he uses: anger, envy, revenge, and frustration.

Did you every notice that when you're worried, when you're fretting at what life has thrown your way, you respond to people around you with more impatience, frustration, and anger?

In the 1600s, Simon Patrick wrote, "It is distrust of God to be troubled about what is to come; impatience against God to be troubled with what is present; and anger at God to be troubled for what is past."

In other words, worry, anxiety, sets up a whole complex of destructive feelings and attitudes that spread through our lives and relationships.

And at the heart of it is the sinful self, the self that wants to be in control, but can't. Life isn't within our control, and if we try to wrestle it into our control, we will likely make ourselves and everyone around us miserable.

A Jewish Proverb says, "Worms eat you when you're dead; worries eat you when you're alive."

Since life is so unpredictable for us, the really important question is "Do I trust God"?

The whole Christian life comes down to that. Do I put my life in God's hands?

The inventor and industrialist Henry Ford told a reporter, "I believe God is managing affairs and that He doesn't need any advice from me. With God in charge, I believe everything will work out for the best in the end.

So what is there to worry about?"

Remember Michael Jordan's telling phrase, "I let the game come to me?"

That's something like the life of faith and trust to which the Psalmist and Jesus calls us.

You're not in control, except for one thing, how you respond moment by moment to life's twists and turns.

And the way we are called to respond is to trust in God, a trust that can lead us from constant anxiety to calm and steadfast waiting on the Lord.

From the heat of anxiety we turn to the calm of trust.

At first sight, the constant drumbeat of trust in the Psalm, or from Jesus, doesn't sound all that helpful.

The message seems to be: *Just don't worry. Just trust in God*. But how do we shut off that background static of worry that drones on in our brains?

As you read the Psalm, the deep wealth of trusting God comes through in the cascade of words the

Psalmist uses to describe it. "Take delight, dwell, commit your way, be still before the Lord, wait."

This cornucopia of words, which might seem confusing to us at first, shows us that trust is a multi-faceted reality. It's like a destination that can be reached in a variety of ways.

Are you impatient? Then for the word *trust*, substitute *'wait for the Lord'*.

Hang in there with the faith, that in whatever trouble you find yourself, there are seeds of goodness and growth that God has placed there that will take time to reveal themselves.

Do you have a hard time sticking with a course of action that you know is right because it doesn't immediately pay off? Then substitute *trust* for *'Commit your way to the Lord'*.

If life's problems have drained you of joy, and faith has become a duty, then trust in the Lord means *'delight yourself in the Lord'*.

Trust sometimes takes the course of receiving life with thanksgiving and enjoying what you have rather than being angry or frustrated with what you don't have.

If worry makes you fearfully scramble about for a way out of your problems, then trust takes the form of *'being still before the Lord'*. You take the time to sit in God's presence, letting his love soak into your soul, realizing that your life is in God's hands.

Trust is a many-splendoured thing, evoked by all these words that the Psalmist uses to describe how it works in our lives.

But in the end, it comes down to what Brennan Manning calls 'ruthless trust'. This is an absolute abandonment of ourselves into the arms of God. It's really trusting that God is in control, that, as the Psalmist says, he "laughs at the way of the wicked and sees their day coming."

It's the conviction that God has a plan for the world, which was revealed in Jesus Christ to make all things new.

We trust God not because he has offered us some incontrovertible proof, but because God has shone his face to us in Jesus Christ.

Jesus' life was a life of *ruthless trust* in his Father, and in a final act of trust, quoting Psalm 31:5,

he said from the cross, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

If God is trustworthy, then we can let the game come to us.

We can let life happen, with all its incredible ups and downs, its delights and devastations because we trust that God has the game in his hand.

John Kavanaugh is a professor of Christian ethics. He once went to live at Mother Teresa's "house for the dying" in Calcutta for three months.

Somehow he thought that he might find the answers to some nagging questions about where his life was headed.

On his first morning there he met Mother Teresa herself. She asked him, "And what can I do for you?"

Kavanaugh asked her to pray for him.

"And what shall I pray for?" she asked.

He voiced the request that had taken him the thousands of miles from his home in the U.S.: "Pray that I might have clarity."

She looked at him sternly and said, "No, I will not do that."

When he asked her why, she said, "Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and that's what you have to let go of."

But Kavanaugh replied that she always seemed to have complete clarity about what she was doing and the direction of her life.

She laughed and said, "I have never had clarity, what I always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God."

In the book *'Faith's Check Book'* Charles Spurgeon wrote, "It is always weakness to be fretting and worrying, questioning and mistrusting. What can we do if we wear ourselves to skin and bone? Can we gain anything by fearing and fuming? Do we not unfit ourselves for action, and unhinge our minds for wise decision? We are sinking by our struggles when we might float by faith. ... Oh for grace to be confident in God."

The well-known American preacher & writer Clovis Chappell wrote: "Years ago, in the pioneer days

of aviation, a pilot was making a flight around the world.

After he had been gone for some two hours from his last landing field, he heard a noise in his plane, which he recognized as the gnawing of a rat.

He realized that while his plane had been on the ground a rat had gotten in.

For all he knew the rat could be gnawing through a vital cable or control of the plane. It was a very serious situation. He was both concerned and anxious.

At first he did not know what to do. It was two hours back to the landing field from which he had taken off and more than two hours to the next field ahead.

Then he remembered that the rat is a rodent. It is not made for the heights; it is made to live on the ground and under the ground. Therefore the pilot began to climb.

He went up a thousand feet, then another thousand and another until he was more than twenty thousand feet up.

The gnawing ceased. The rat was dead. He could not survive in the atmosphere of those heights.

More than two hours later the pilot brought the plane safely to the next landing field and found the dead rat."

Worry is a rodent. It cannot live in the secret place of the Most High. It cannot breathe in the atmosphere made vital by prayer and familiarity with the Scripture.

Worry dies when, through faith and trust, we ascend to the Lord through prayer and His Word.